

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

FACULTY OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ORIENTAL MYSTICISM IN W.B. YEATS

THESIS PRESENTED FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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JULY 1959

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Introduction

We cannot fully appreciate and understand W.B. Yeats as a poet without trying to understand him also as a man and a theorist. His poetry and plays are often read with a half-smothered prejudice against his character and his beliefs; and thus they lose much that is important and interesting in them. Theosophy, Buddhism, Cabalism, Neo-Platonism, Rosicrucianism and the system of A Vision have proved steadily embarrassing to his defenders and convincing to his detractors. He has often been attacked for failing to attach himself to a more decent and gentlemanly creed. W.H. Auden, for example, finds it difficult to believe that an outstanding poet of our time could associate with Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Samuel Liddle MacGregor Mathers, or Shri Purohit Swami:

How on earth, we wonder, could a man of Yeats's gifts take such nonsense seriously? I have a further bewilderment, which may be due to my English upbringing, one of snobbery. How could Yeats, with his great aesthetic appreciation of aristocracy, ancestral houses, ceremonious tradition, take up something so essentially lower-middle class... mediums, spells, the Mysterious Orient -- how embarrassing. ¹

Some critics argue that Yeats is simply an escapist, and that his system is private and traditionless. His apologists, on the other

1. W.H. Auden, 'Yeats as an Example', The Kenyon Review, Spring, 1948, pp. 188-189.

hand, assert that he adopted his cosmology on purely aesthetic grounds, i.e., not because it is true but because it was congenial to his art.

The object of this thesis is neither to indict nor to apologise; it is an attempt to understand some of Yeats' theories by relating them to the Oriental traditions on which they are based, and to indicate in this way that his symbolism is neither private nor rootless. As a matter of fact, the philosophy and theology embodied in A Vision belong to a stream of ancient thought which has flown through many lands and centuries but which has in modern times become despised and obscured through the development of experimental science, whose material benefits have proved to be so much greater than those of the old systems.

We are not required to adopt Yeats' beliefs in order to understand him; but if we cannot at least inform ourselves as though we shared them, there is a level at which his poetry is not for us. We may easily ignore or sweep aside the supernatural and the esoteric when it occasionally crops up in other poets. In Yeats, however, there is hardly a line which the ordinary reader can relish but that the next refers to 'gyre' or 'sphere', 'anti-self' or 'Anima Mundi'. In other words, the discipline of his cosmology had an extraordinary structural, seminal, and substantial importance to the degree that without it he could hardly have written at all. In order to grasp the meaning of his system and to clear some of the uncertainties which stand in

the way of a full interpretation of his poetry, we must seriously examine some of the traditions which he studied either through direct contact with their representatives or indirectly through his membership in the esoteric societies in Dublin and London. We should also assume that every book in his library was there for a purpose and that it was patiently read. The part played by Mrs W.B. Yeats in the composition of A Vision and her contribution to the poet's conception of reality is also of great importance. An attempt has been made in the third chapter to relate some of her occult experiences to the central myth in Yeats' system. Her membership in the Anthroposophical and Golden Dawn Societies has doubtless helped, consciously or unconsciously, to mould her automatic writings.

Yeats could not have used a Weltanschauungⁿ which he did not inherit as a poetic myth unless he was more seriously involved in it than has commonly been supposed. His handling of the Irish legends provides a clear indication of the profound and penetrating impact of his beliefs. At the cost of arousing the anger of Celtic scholars, he freely adapted the ancient sagas to suit the Oriental traditions on which his philosophy was founded. He interpreted some of their implications and inserted others to develop an esoteric meaning which is in most cases alien to the spirit of the original. This attitude is maintained in the plays where the Celtic material is subjected to a discipline and a technique borrowed from the Noh plays of medieval Japan.

If Yeats has turned to the East and to non-European traditions, he was certainly not eccentric, and by no means isolated from the main thought-currents of his age. Like many artists of his generation he was alarmed by the success of modern science, which was shattering all the accepted values and the traditional attitudes. The establishment of the secret societies through which the wave of mysticism and occultism swept across Europe at the turn of the century was in itself an expression of the dissatisfaction with the current faith in reason, and in science. It will be objected by some that Yeats could have taken refuge in Christianity. We should remember, however, that he rejected Christianity because, in his view, Christianity cannot fully accept the world.

In writing about Yeats' poems, I have inevitably concerned myself with the ideas from which they came: their background, their sources, and their ingredients. These facts provide certain clues to his poetry but the poetry cannot be summed up in them. In other words, if I have emphasised the poet's indebtedness to Oriental mysticism, I have no intention of denying either the complexity or the originality of his poetry. From the currents of thought whose influence he felt, Yeats took what appealed to him and gave it the stamp of his own poetic genius.

Although the substance and essence of Yeats' beliefs were Oriental, he was continually looking for these beliefs in the works of Western philosophers. He read Berkeley, Hegel or Croce simply to reassure himself of the validity of the systems which he adopted. These well-known

philosophers also provided him with respectable masks behind which he could shelter from the derision and ridicule of the world.

I wish to thank Mrs W.B. Yeats for giving me access to her husband's library, and to the manuscript material in her possession. I am also indebted to Mr T.R. Henn and Mr F.A.C. Wilson for their help, encouragement and advice.

I

THE IMPACT OF EASTERN AND PSEUDO-EASTERN IDEAS

'I would forget the wisdom of the East and remember its grossness and its romance. Yet when I wander upon the cliffs where Tiberius wandered, I know that the new intensity that seems to have come into all visible and tangible things is not a reaction from that wisdom but its very self.'

W.B. Yeats¹

Born in 1865, W.B. Yeats was bound to come, early in life, under the influence of Victorian science and rationalism. His father, who had found in John Stuart Mill the ideal of the reasonable man, tried to predispose him to scepticism. When, in 1880, the boy refused, in spite of his mother's wishes, to go to church, his father supported his right to decide for himself. For more than two years Darwin, Wallace, Huxley, and Haeckel made a ferment in Yeats' brain. Intrigued by natural history, he evolved a private theory about the 'colour of sea-anemones.'² Fascinated by geology, he was 'hot for argument in

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision, London, 1925, intro. p. xiii.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'Reveries Over Childhood and Youth', Autobiographies, London, 1955, p. 60.

refutation of Adam and Noah and the Seven Days.¹ His enthusiasm, as we know, did not last long for his affections were soon alienated from science. He discovered that he had assumed scepticism against his own inclination and that his interest in science was largely pretended. He came to think the stories he heard 'his mother and a fisherman's wife exchange over cups of tea'² more exciting. For him the factual and imaginative worlds were moving towards tension:

... I began to play at being a sage, a magician or a poet. I had many idols, and as I climbed along the narrow ledge I was now Manfred on his glacier, and now Prince Athanase with his solitary lamp, but I soon chose Alastor for my chief of men and longed to share his melancholy...³

Thus his preoccupation with unimaginative science was only a passing phase. He knew that he could never be reconciled to Darwin and Huxley again. He recorded later this dramatic reversal in his attitude in 'The Trembling of the Veil' :

I was unlike others of my generation in one thing only. I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detest, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. ⁴

He felt the want of a religion and, having no sympathy with any established one, he looked for a religion in art. He believed,

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'Reveries Over Childhood and Youth', Autobiographies, p. 60.
 2. Ibid., p. 61.
 3. Ibid., p. 64.
 4. Ibid., pp. 115-116.

at one point, that if he could assemble the affirmations of the great¹ poets in their finest moments, he would make a new creed out of them. Like Arnold, he thought that poetry could replace religion. But this² was no final solution for Yeats: art religion was 'too Low Church' for his taste. He wished for some system of philosophy which would include his belief that the legends, personalities, and emotions handed down by poets and painters were the nearest approach to truth. He was to spend practically the rest of his life a restless seeker for an authoritative substitute religion that could satisfy him both intellectually and emotionally.

During a visit to Professor Dowden's house in 1885, Yeats heard³ A.P. Sinnett's Esoteric Buddhism discussed. He procured a copy of the book, read it, and passed it to Charles Johnston, a brilliant High School boy, who at the time wanted to be a Christian missionary. Johnston was immediately converted to Buddhism, gave up his idea of becoming a missionary and joined Yeats and a few others in taking a room at the top of a dilapidated house in York Street. They started in Dublin the Hermetic Society to promote oriental religions and theosophy⁴ generally. It was named hermetic because it was to deal with a philosophy which until recently had been kept secret or only revealed in symbolism. The society met for the first time on June 16, 1885, with Yeats as chairman. He opened the meeting by announcing that

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'Ideas of Good and Evil', Essays, London, 1924, p. 79.
 2. L. Macneice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, London, 1941, p. 23.
 3. E.A. Boyd, Ireland's Literary Renaissance, London, 1916, p. 213.
 4. J. Hone, W.B. Yeats, 1865-1939, London, 1942, p. 47.

'the Society has been assembled to discuss the wonders of Eastern philosophy.'¹ The papers read that day dealt with the question of whether the Mahatmas of the Theosophists really existed, and what their powers might be.

The following year Johnston crossed to London to interview Madame Blavatsky, and returned to form the famous Dublin Lodge, which for many years had rooms in Ely Place. Yeats did not become a member, though he was in and out of the rooms a great deal chiefly to see George Russell (A.E.) who was to assume later the leadership of this little community.

The most exciting event of the year, as far as Yeats was concerned, was the visit paid by a Brahmin from Bengal, Babu Mohini Chatterji, who had been invited to come to Dublin to aid the foundation of the new Theosophical Lodge. The Brahmin had been one of the earliest members of the Society in India, and possessed a wide knowledge of Sankara's philosophy. Mohini, 'a handsome young man with the typical face of Christ'² had a very strong hold on Yeats's imagination:

... One day somebody told us he had met a Brahmin in London who knew more of these things than any book. With a courage which I still admire, we wrote and asked him to come and teach us, and he came... and for a week and all day long he unfolded what seemed to be all wisdom. He sat there beautiful, as only an Eastern is beautiful, making little gestures with his delicate hands...³

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1. R. Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, London, 1949, p. 42.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'Reveries Over Childhood and Youth', Autobiographies, p. 92.
 3. W.B. Yeats, 'The Pathway', The Collected Works, London, 1908, Vol. VIII, pp. 191-192.

Chatterji taught that according to Sankara everything we perceive, including so-called illusions, exists in the external world; that this is a stream which flows on, out of human control; that we are nothing but a mirror and that deliverance consists in turning the mirror away so that it reflects nothing. Yeats, in those days 'seeking to be a disciple with a pathetic insistence'¹ adopted the quietist outlook of this philosopher. In 'Reveries Over Childhood and Youth', he wrote, 'It was my first meeting with a philosophy that confirmed my vague speculations and seemed at once logical and boundless'.² He thought he had found in the young Brahmin one of those imaginary people he had long been looking for:

Alcibiades fled from Socrates lest he might do nothing but listen to him all life long, and I am certain that we, seeking as youth will for some unknown deed and thought, all dreamed that but to listen to this man who threw the enchantment of power about silent and gentle things, and at last to think as he did, was the one thing worth doing and thinking...³

To Yeats, at the time, the measure of the greatness of any doctrine, religion or dogma was how far it fitted in with his own particular scheme of life; how far to him it was acceptable. The poet was so enchanted when he heard Mohini exclaim, 'I have never been able to discover any reason why prose should exist'⁴ and add, for the benefit of a school-master who was present, that fairy tales only should be taught at school.

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1. A.N. Jeffares, W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet, London, 1949, p. 32.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'Reveries Over Childhood and Youth', Autobiographies, pp. 91-92.
 3. W.B. Yeats, 'The Pathway', The Collected Works, Vol. VIII, p. 196.
 4. Ibid., p. 194.

The character of Chatterji and the philosophy he brought to Dublin have unmistakably left their mark on Yeats' poetry and plays.¹ Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the Hermetic Society and the Dublin Lodge have played a prominent part in Ireland's literary renaissance. John Eglinton's account in Irish Literary Portraits leaves us in no doubt:

A branch of the Theosophical Society was founded, which, if all were told, was as truly the nucleus from which the Irish Literary Renaissance originated as were the contemporary Gaelic and literary Societies: indeed, Yeats once declared that in a few years it had done more for Irish literature than Trinity College in its three centuries.²

Yeats was still hesitant about becoming a full-fledged member of the Theosophical Society when he moved with his family to London in May 1887. Madame Blavatsky had arrived a month before and within two weeks of her landing had founded a Blavatsky Lodge. Yeats went to call on her with a letter of introduction from Charles Johnston:

Presently having heard that Madame Blavatsky had arrived from France, or from India, I thought it time to look the matter up. Certainly if wisdom existed anywhere in the world it must be in some lonely mind admitting no duty to us, communing with God only, conceding nothing from fear or favour.³

Madame Blavatsky, an extraordinary woman with frighteningly fertile imagination, psychic intuition and compelling personality attracted him very much. He describes her as 'a sort of female Dr. Johnson,

1. See chapters II and V.

2. John Eglinton, Irish Literary Portraits, London, 1935, p. 44.

3. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, p. 173.

impressive to every man or woman who had themselves any richness.¹
She reassured him of the validity of his anti-materialistic theories by the certainty and erudition with which she expounded them. Finally on reading her book, Isis Unveiled, he enthusiastically joined the Theosophical Society. The following year, he read with great avidity The Secret Doctrine which provided him with a wealth of information about ancient religions and their symbolism. H.P. Blavatsky in Isis Unveiled asserted the similarity of the fundamental beliefs of all religions, and attributed it to the existence of a secret doctrine which was their common source. The Secret Doctrine, her chief work, brought Yeats into contact for the first time with a comprehensive cosmology. The book proposed to make one harmonious whole out of the scriptures of the great Asiatic and early European religions. Madame Blavatsky's faith has three main articles: in the first place, there is an Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable Principle on which all speculation is impossible. Its first manifestation is both male and female; a sort of cosmic hermaphrodite, who divides himself into twin powers. These, through the one fecundating the other, produced the world. The creation is, from a certain point of view, a fall, a degradation. Secondly, she asserts the universality of the law of periodicity, of flux and reflux, or as she sometimes calls it, of polarity. According to this doctrine, the world is a conflict of opposites; good and evil

1. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, p. 173.

are the contraries without which life cannot exist. These are not the only opposites, for everywhere, in heaven and on earth, forces are continually clashing. Thirdly, she asserts the fundamental identity of all souls with the Universal Oversoul and proclaims the obligatory pilgrimage of every one through the cycle of incarnation in accordance with Karmic law. Successive reincarnations bring a being through all the races of the world, then through the different worlds and cycles of the universe. Duality has no place in her system for matter and spirit are twin brothers born of the same source. There is a continual involution of spirit into matter and an evolution of matter into spirit.

She further states that man is composed of a certain number of bodies (or souls) contained within each other, which are not all equally affected by death. This composition is the microcosmic image of the universe itself. Then follows a description of the corresponding seven periods, seven planets, seven continents and seven races of man.

Man being made of a divine substance, his desires are sacred and his sensuality is legitimate. Desire and matter are good in themselves, but reason must dominate passion which becomes holy when thus approved. Evolution makes souls remount the steps that their fall caused them to descend, and ends by re-incorporating them with the original essence. Thus divine unity, destroyed by creation, is reconstituted.

Madame Blavatsky reinforces her doctrines throughout the book with examples from Eastern religions, and European occultism, mysticism, and philosophy. In this way she demonstrates, in a most fascinating manner, the essential oneness of all ancient symbolism.

The aim that Blavatsky had set for the Theosophical Society was three-fold:

- 1st. To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.
- 2nd. To promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literatures, religions, philosophies, and sciences, and to demonstrate the importance of that study.
- 3rd. To investigate laws of nature and the psychic powers latent in man.¹

Although the last article of the programme stated that psychic research was to be one of the aims of the Society, Madame Blavatsky discouraged her over-eager followers from plunging too deeply into Theosophical depths, warning them of the dangers of black magic. But in 1888 the demand for magical instruction was so great that she resolved to form an Esoteric Section for the sincerest of her 'chelas'. Yeats was delighted and joined the group soon after it was formed. He hoped that the Esoteric Section would give him the opportunity of proving to his own satisfaction, and to the

1. George Russell (A.E.), 'A Word upon the Objects of the Theosophical Society', Irish Theosophist, November, 1892, pp. 9-10.

satisfaction even of sceptics like his father, that occult phenomena were possible.¹ It was at this time that he wrote in a journal which he kept during his membership, 'I believe Madame Blavatsky's teachers are wholly righteous learned teachers and that I have in them all due confidence as from pupil to teacher'.² The Esoteric Section gave him a system of arcane correspondences and symbols, establishing interrelationships between parts of the body, the seasons, colours and elements. This, besides being very useful for his three-volume study of Blake, inspired him to go to some of Blavatsky's sources for further study.

In the summer of 1890 trouble started when the experiments in the occult section failed to yield any miracles. Doubts began to rise in the minds of many members, and the committee was thought unlikely to further the Theosophical cause. Blavatsky's secretary went to see Yeats and asked him to resign from the Society. He regretfully complied:

Certainly it was a romantic house, and I did not separate myself from it by my own will.³

There is no doubt that the six years Yeats spent as a member of the Theosophical Society had brought him into contact with a system which encouraged him to bring together all the fairy tales he had heard in his childhood, the poetry he had read in adolescence, and

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1. R. Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p.66.
 2. Unpublished manuscript in possession of Mrs W.B. Yeats.
 3. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, p. 181.

the dreams he had been dreaming all his life. The ideas he picked up at this period of life remained latent in his mind and gave his thought a permanent basis. Theosophical conceptions of history, of flux, of reincarnation, and of Anima Mundi are implicit in many of his works.¹ Referring to Blavatsky's overwhelming influence on the poet, F.A. Wilson writes:

One does not, perhaps, outgrow such an authority; one reorientates oneself as regards her, but her work retains part validity, especially when one's own later researches confirm her conclusions -- and much that Yeats was to read confirmed hers.²

Theosophy did for Yeats what the classics do for other men; it stood for a background of culture in his life and represented much hard work and mental discipline.

In March 1890, a few months before his expulsion from the Theosophical Society, Yeats was initiated into the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn. The London Section of this Order was founded by S.L. MacGregor Mathers, Dr. William Woodman, and Dr. William Westcott. They were 'Masons, officers of the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, and serious students of Zoroastrianism, Egyptology, Hermetism, Orphism, Pythagoreanism, Gnosticism and Cabalism.'³ All members took special order names -- usually in Latin -- and

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1. For details see chapters II, III and IV.
 2. F.A. Wilson, W.B. Yeats and Tradition, London, 1958, p. 28.
 3. Virginia Moore, The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search for Reality, New York, 1954, p. 128.

Yeats was known among his fellow Hermetists as Demon Est Deus Inversus¹. This name is the title of an important chapter in The Secret Doctrine. In fact the tenets of the organization were essentially the same as those of the Theosophists and one could belong to both groups at once, as Yeats did for a time.

The poet made the acquaintance of MacGregor Mathers, the high priest of the Order, at the British Museum:

At the British Museum Reading-Room I often saw a man... with a gaunt resolute face, and an athletic body, who seemed, before I heard his name, or knew the nature of his studies, a figure of romance... He was the author of The Kabbala Unveiled... He had copied many manuscripts on magic ceremonial and doctrine in the British Museum, and was to copy many more in Continental libraries...²

Mathers, who had assisted Blavatsky in writing The Secret Doctrine, gave Yeats to understand that his Order, unlike that of the Theosophists, did not object to the performing of 'phenomena'; on the contrary it encouraged members to demonstrate their power over the material world. The poet, in spite of his great interest in visions, had little clairvoyant ability. Under Mathers' instructions he learnt how to paint cabalistic symbols on cards and how to use them for evoking states of reverie in himself and sometimes trance states in others:

He gave me a cardboard symbol and I closed my eyes.

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1. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, London, 1888, Vol. I, p. 411.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, pp. 182-183.

Sight came slowly... there rose before me mental images that I could not control: a desert and a black Titan raising himself up by his two hands from the middle of a heap of ancient ruins. Mathers explained that I had seen a being of the order of Salamanders because he had shown me their symbol...1

He found that these images began to affect his writing, making it more sensuous and vivid; and he believed that with the images would come more profound states of the soul:

I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by their successors, the poets, the musicians and the artists.2

Yeats had spent twenty-five years of his life submitting to the rigorous discipline of the Hermetic Order and striving to pass its grades of initiation. The farrago of cults and traditions that had gone into the making of the tenets of this Order have misled many people into thinking that the poet was an inconsistent follower of a multitude of creeds. A short outline of the central doctrine of Hermetism and the various religious and philosophical systems to which it was pivotal would help remove this misconception.

Yeats encountered Hermetism for the first time in the works of H.P. Blavatsky. According to tradition, as reported in Isis Unveiled, the original Smaragdine Tablet was found on the dead body of Hermes. The Secret Doctrine discusses Hermetism at length and sets it forth,

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, pp. 185-186.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'Ideas of Good and Evil', Essays, p. 60.

with Hinduism, as one of 'the two most ancient religious philosophies
on the globe',¹ pronouncing them as identical:

The Secret Doctrine of the Aryan East is found
repeated under Egyptian symbolism and phraseology
in the Books of Hermes.²

Although the Order of the Golden Dawn instructed its members mainly
in 'the principles of Occult Science and the Magic of Hermes',³
it also taught them that the Hermetic philosophy underwent permutations
without ever losing its central doctrine of correspondence:

What is below is like that which is above,
and what is above is similar to that which is
below, to accomplish the wonders of one thing.⁴

This doctrine teaches that there is but one Law, one Principle,
and one Truth. That which is above is analogically as that which is
below. All that which is, is the result of quantities and equilibriums.

In 1906, G.R.S. Mead, whom Yeats had known in the Esoteric Section
of the Theosophical Society published a three-volume work, 'Thrice-
Greatest Hermes: Studies in Hellenistic Theosophy and Gnosis'.

In the preface the author states that Hermes Trismegistus was the
Greek name for Thoth, the Egyptian God of Wisdom who enunciated
truths which constitute the spring of a stream of wisdom flowing
through thousands of years down to the present, and inseparable from
esoteric or 'true' Christianity. The lost Hermetic writings have

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1. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.I, p. 285.
 2. Ibid., Vol III, p. 30.
 3. Israel Regardie, The Golden Dawn, Chicago, 1937-1940, Vol I, p. 16.
 4. H.P. Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled, Point Loma, California, 1919, Vol.I, p. 507

left only echoes in the Book of the Dead.

The Hermetic Corpus was lost to the world for a long time and reappeared only when Humanism opened a gate into the West. Since then it has travelled hand in hand with the Neo-Platonism it had helped to create. Mead tells us that Hermetism is identical with the philosophy that shines forth from the hieroglyphics on ancient Egyptian monuments. Thoth is the primitive type of the Logos of Plato and the Word of the Christians. When the Greek mind met this Egyptian doctrine, myths were allegorized and converted into philosophy. He further states that the main Trismegistic sermon, The Shepherd of Men or Poemandres, must have come from the pre-Christian monasteries of the Therapeuts, a large colony of mystics living beside Egypt's¹ Mareotic Lake, so often mentioned by Yeats. The central doctrine that lies behind the teachings of Hermes is that of correspondence. Each earthly thing reflects something in heaven. The visible creation was conceived as the counterpart of the unseen world and we are surrounded by kinships, secret accords and cosmic sympathies. Yeats expressed this doctrine in a less abstract form in 'Ribh Denounces Patrick' :

Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed.
As man, as beast, as ^anephemeral fly begets, Godhead
begets Godhead,
For things below are copies, the Great Smaragdine
Tablet said.²

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'Under Ben Bulbin' and 'Demon and Beast', The Collected Poems, London, 1955, p. 397 and p. 209.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, pp. 328-329.

God, according to Poemandres, 'did bring forth Man co-equal to Himself'.¹
If He were not in a sense Man too, He could not beget man. The whole
theosophy of Egypt was intended to lead a man up the stairway of
perfection whereby he would become superman, or as Hermes would say,
'at last and in truth 'man' and not 'a procession of Fate.'²

This doctrine was reflected in the rituals and teachings of the
Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn. Yeats, as a neophyte, passed
through the Pillars of Hermes. At a later stage a lecture explained
to him that in the 125th Chapter of the Book of the Dead an Egyptian
initiate was brought to the same pillars where, having stood under
the scales of a balance successfully, he was allowed to announce to
Thoth-Hermes that he is clean of evil. Whereupon it was proclaimed:
'Thy meat shall be from the Infinite'.³ Traces of the same doctrine
could be found in the ritual of initiation into the 5=6 Grade of
Adeptus Minor which Yeats underwent around 1900 in the Isis-Urania
Temple on Fitzroy Street.⁴ In 1898 the poet wrote to W.T. Horton,
a fellow Hermetist, 'Egyptian faces may very well come to you after
your initiation, as the Order [of the Golden Dawn] is greatly under
Egyptian influence.'⁵

The Hermetic Order regarded many bodies of belief as different
chapters in the history of its central doctrine of correspondence.

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1. G.R.S. Mead (ed.), Thrice-Greatest Hermes, London, 1906, Vol.I, p. 139.
 2. Ibid., Vol.III, p. 326.
 3. Israel Regardie, The Golden Dawn, Vol.I, pp. 110-117.
 4. Ibid., Vol.II, pp. 230-236.
 5. Allan Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, London, 1954, p. 261.

It looked upon Cabalism, Platonism, Jewish and Christian Gnosticism, Rosicrucianism and medieval alchemy as different expressions of a single parent doctrine; one arcane and universal wisdom. Yeats studied diligently many of these traditions and a brief sketch of those that had a long and acknowledged influence over him would be relevant to our purpose.

Cabalism and Rosicrucianism were among the first and most important traditions affiliated to Hermetism. Yeats' curiosity about the Cabala was aroused by the writings and conversations of Madame Blavatsky. She devoted a whole chapter of The Secret Doctrine¹ to the study of its tenets, and in Isis Unveiled she called the fundamental geometrical figure of the Cabala 'the key of the universal problem'². According to her, the Cabala 'originally came from Aryan sources, through central Asia, Persia, India, and Mesopotamia'³. Yeats' main sources for Cabalism and alchemy were Westcott's An Introduction to the Study of the Kabala, and Mathers' The Kabbalah Unveiled. Cabalism and Rosicrucianism as European offshoots of the Hermetic tradition were very important to Yeats roughly between 1900 and 1910. Westcott's book explains that the body of Jewish theological speculation was characterised by a mystical number- and-letter symbolism. He discusses the oldest treatise, the Sephir Yetzirah, and the famous Zohar before he comes to the theoretical

1. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.III, Ch. IX .

2. H.P. Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled, Vol.I, p. 14.

3. Op. Cit., Vol.I, p. 376.

and practical Cabala. The central doctrine, he states, is that of the ten Sephiroth or Emanations of God: a system of correspondence. Each human soul belongs to the highest of four worlds and parallels exist between the stars, the world, the human body and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This laid the foundation for medieval magic, the purpose of which was the development of the soul. The system is also echoed in Christian Cabalism and still more clearly in Rosicrucianism.

Mathers' book claims that the Cabala was a system of theosophy first taught by God himself to a select company of angels who formed a theosophic school in Paradise. He goes on to define the Book of Concealed Mystery as the book of the equilibrium of balance resulting from contraries. He applies the term balance to the two opposite natures in each triad of the Sephiroth. In each of these trinities or triads is a duad of opposite sexes, and a uniting intelligence which is the result. In this, the masculine and feminine potencies are regarded as the two scales of the balance, and the uniting Sephira as the beam which joins them. Thus 'balance' may be said to symbolise the Triune or Trinity in Unity; Unity being represented by the central point of the beam. The main earthly correlatives of the duads are the sun and the moon.

Yeats' thorough knowledge of this system becomes apparent when we read his explanation of it in 'The Stirring of the Bones':

The Tree of Life is a geometrical figure made up of ten circles or spheres called Sephiroth joined by straight lines. Once men must have thought of it as like some great tree covered with its fruits and its foliage, but at some period, in the thirteenth century perhaps, touched by the mathematical genius of Arabia in all likelihood, it had lost its natural form. The Sephiroth Tiphareth, attributed to the sun, is joined to the Sephiroth Yesod, attributed to the moon, by a straight line called the path Samekh...1


The Christian Cabala represents a cosmogony which has much resemblance to that of the Neo-Platonists. The Universe is considered a series of emanations from an ineffable, boundless source; the further from the source the emanations go, the cruder they become, until they form the world of matter, which is spirit in its lowest form. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many scholars, including Pico della Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa and Henry More—to mention only those studied by Yeats—were strongly influenced by the Cabalistic tradition. In the nineteenth century Eliphas Lévi, claimed to have discovered the secret relationship between the ten Sephiroth of the Cabalistic Tree of Life and the trumps of the ancient Tarot cards (hence Yeats' interest in the Tarot pack). Other discoveries led to an infusion of Egyptian magic, while the Rosicrucians poured some of their legends and rituals into the cauldron. Throughout these traditions runs the central conviction that the magician can ascend the Sephirotic ladder towards the

1. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, p. 375.

source of spiritual and material power.

The main Rosicrucian document which the Order 'directed members to study is The Chymical Marriage of Christian Rosencreutz, printed in 1616'.¹ This cosmic romance or autobiographical allegory was typical of the progressive initiations of the Hermetic-Cabalistic-Rosicrucian Order to which Yeats belonged. The Rosicrucians believe that this world and indeed the whole universe is permeated with the essence of the Creator, that every rock is instinct with life, that every plant is imbued with a sense derived from the Master Mind that caused it to exist, and that each living thing moves, acts, and thinks in accordance with the supreme design by which all things are made. Although the Rosicrucians never declared the transmutation of metals or the prolongation of life to be part of their practice yet they spoke of these in parables with the full and complete knowledge that all things are possible, and that, with the forces of nature under their control, they could do even these. Commenting on their philosophy, Yeats wrote in 1930, 'I had discovered, early in researches, that their doctrine was not merely chemical phant_asy, but a philosophy they applied to the world, to the elements and to man himself; and that they sought to fashion gold out of common metals merely as part of an universal transmutation of all things into some divine and imperishable substance.'²

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1. Virginia Moore, The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search for Reality, p. 115.
 2. W.B. Yeats, Pages from a Diary Written in Nineteen Hundred and Thirty, Dublin, 1944, pp.18-19.

The poet's first introduction to Rosicrucianism and its symbols came also through H.P. Blavatsky. In The Secret Doctrine she refers to them as 'those sectarians who show as the symbol of pregenetic Kosmos this sign , calling it 'the Union of the Rose and Cross', the great mystery of occult generation.'¹ She explains that the Buddhist 'Spirit of Fire' became the key-note of Rosicrucian philosophy.² According to her, their main symbols and their basic rites were pre-eminently phallic and sexual.³ On the other hand, the Order of the Golden Dawn looked upon Rosicrucian literature as an offshoot of both Egyptian and Christian-Cabalistic traditions. The hierophant of the Order, addressing Yeats during his promotion to the Grade of Adeptus Minor said, 'Arise now as an Adeptus Minor of the Rose of Ruby and the Cross of Gold, in the sign of Osiris Slain.'⁴

In Paris at the end of the century, Yeats visited the 'mysterious house'⁵ of Marquis Stanislas de Guaita, founder of the Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose-Croix and author of La Clef de la Magie Noire and Le Serpent de la Genèse. He met also Sar Péladan, founder of a more catholic order of the Rosy Cross. Péladan claimed to be the descendant of the old Magi, the inheritor of the wisdom of

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1. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.I, p. 19.
 2. Ibid., p. 6.
 3. Ibid., Vol.III, pp. 296-297.
 4. Israel Regardie, The Golden Dawn, Vol.III, p. 232.
 5. W.B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', Essays, p. 536.

Zoroaster, Pythagoras, and Orpheus; and his order purported to revive and unite with the Rosicrucians the Knights Templars.

Hermetism, to its followers, was a tradition in the sense of a set of beliefs handed down by great adepts to their disciples and initiates. Some of the channels of transmission were visible; for instance, there existed evidence that Pythagoras and other Greek philosophers had visited Egypt.¹ Plato, according to the Hermetists, never claimed to be the inventor of all that he wrote, but gave credit for it to Pythagoras, who, in turn, pointed to the East as the source where he derived his information and his philosophy. Blavatsky reiterates in her books that Parmenides and Empedocles as well as Pythagoras went to Egypt and the East to instruct themselves in the 'Mysteries'.² Their ideas were assimilated by the Neo-Platonists and thoroughly combined with the primeval doctrines of the Oriental Cabala:

Never did the Neo-Platonic school reach such a height of philosophy as when nearest its end. Uniting the mystic Theosophy of old Egypt with the refined philosophy of the Greeks; nearer to the ancient Mysteries of Thebes and Memphis than they had been for centuries... friendly with the acutest men of the Jewish nation, who were deeply imbued with the Zoroastrian ideas, the Neo-Platonists tended to amalgamate the old wisdom of the Oriental Kabala with the more refined conceptions of Occidental Theosophists.³

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1. G.R.S. Mead (ed.), Thrice-Greatest Hermes, Vol.III, p. 325.
 2. H.P. Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled, Vol.II, p. 39.
 3. Ibid., pp. 40-41.

It is well known that Alexandria was at this time not only a great intellectual centre but the place where East and West rubbed shoulders. The wisdom of Asia was undoubtedly in high repute about this time. Philostratus expressed the highest veneration for the learning of the Indians; Appolonius of Tyana went to India to consult Brahmins; Plotinus himself accompanied the Roman army to Persia in the hope of gathering wisdom. The exact correspondences between Neo-Platonism and the Indian Vedanta and Yoga schools of thought have been worked out by G.R.S. Mead, the well known Theosophist.¹

Yeats' main sources for Platonism and Neo-Platonism were Thomas Taylor's translations of Plato, Pythagoras, Plotinus, Proclus and Porphyry. The system of Plotinus was particularly attractive to Yeats and his fellow-Hermetists on account of its eclecticism. Plotinus, who was an Egyptian by birth, lived and studied under Ammonius Sakkas in Alexandria at a time when it was seething with speculations and schools, teachers and philosophies of all kinds. He drew his philosophy both from Plato and from Hermetic philosophy. There are two principles which stand in the centre of all his writings. First, God is not external to anyone, but is present in all things, though they are ignorant that He is so, and second, that He is not in a certain place, but whenever anything is able to come in contact with Him there He is present. It is because

1. G.R.S. Mead (ed.), Select Works of Plotinus, London, 1895, intro., pp. xvi-xxv.

of our ignorance of the indwelling of God that our life is discordant, for it is clashing with its own inmost principle. We should know that the way home to God lies within ourselves. When the soul of man incarnates it always leaves something of itself above. In order to return to God the soul has to retrace the path along which it came, and the first step is to get to know itself, and so to know God. Thus only can it be restored to the central unity of the Universal Soul. To him the universe is one vast organism and the Heart of God, the source of all life, is at the centre, in which all finite things have their being, and to which they must flow back; for there is in this organism, so Plotinus conceived, a double circulatory movement, an eternal out-breathing and in-breathing, the way down and the way up. The philosophy of Plotinus confirmed, as we shall see later, many of the ideas which Yeats came across during this period.

The Theosophists and the Hermetists were mildly interested in Swedenborg and Boehme as the last European representatives of the secret doctrine. In spite of certain eschatological differences, the Swedish and German visionaries were in complete conformity with the Hermetic central doctrine of correspondence. In The True Christian Religion Swedenborg wrote :

...the land of Canaan... Syria, Mesopotamia, Arabia, Chaldea, Assyria, Egypt, Sidon, Tyre and Nineveh: the inhabitants of all these kingdoms practised a representative form of worship, and consequently had a knowledge of correspondences. The wisdom of that time was from that knowledge, and by it men had an interior perception, and also had communication with the heavens.¹

Boehme expressed the same thing in a different manner when he wrote, 'Whatever is spoken, written or taught of God without knowledge of the signature is dumb and void of understanding.'²

Yeats' interest in Swedenborg and Boehme, however, was mainly aroused by his study of William Blake. Around 1900 he mastered Swedenborg's main ideas and compared them with those of Blake. He noticed some dissimilarities in their conceptions of evil, of discarnate souls, and of reincarnation:

Blake's doctrine of re-incarnation contained in his luminous symbol [Urizen], divides his teaching from that of Swedenborg and Boehme, and unites it with that of Eastern mysticism and the medieval Kabbalists.³

Blake, in fact, quarrelled with many of Swedenborg's conceptions and in The Prophetic Writings condemned him for recapitulating 'all superficial opinions' and repeating 'all the old falsehoods.'⁴ Yeats, as a good disciple, followed the lead of Blake and spoke severely of Swedenborg. He described his mind as 'incredibly dry

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1. E. Swedenborg, The True Christian Religion, London, 1950, Ch. IV, p. 279.
 2. Jacob Boehme, De Signatura Rerum, London, 1651, Ch. I, p. 1.
 3. E.J. Ellis and W.B. Yeats (eds.), The Works of William Blake, London, 1893, Vol. I, p. 274.
 4. D.J. Sloss and J.R. Wallis (eds.), The Prophetic Writings of William Blake, Oxford, 1926, Vol. I, pp. 23-24.

and arid, hard, tangible and cold, like the minerals he assayed for the Swedish government'¹ and his inspiration as 'half-transformed into an opium dream'² by his literal interpretation of the Bible.

Yeats' attitude to Swedenborg and Boehme brought him into line with that of the Hermetists and the Theosophists. Blavatsky refused to recognize Swedenborg as an adept and a mystic:

Swedenborg was undoubtedly a 'natural-born' magician, a seer; he was not an adept. Thus, however closely he may have followed the apparent method of interpretation used by the alchemists and mystic writers, he partially failed...³

The role played by Swedenborg and Boehme in shaping Yeats' ideas has often been exaggerated. To the poet they were no more than points of comparison with what he had learnt elsewhere. He often compared their teachings unfavourably with philosophies that sprang directly from the fountainhead of the secret doctrine:

In the Seventeenth century conscious Samādhi re-appeared in the 'walking trance' of Boehme, when truth fell upon him 'like a bursting shower', and in the eighteenth, much contaminated by belief in the literal inspiration of Scripture, in the visions of Swedenborg... we may I think, concede to Swedenborg an impure Samādhi.⁴

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision, London, 1937, p. 161
 2. Ibid., p. 228.
 3. H.P. Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled, Vol.I, p. 306.
 4. Bhagwan Shree Patanjali, Aphorisms of Yoga, London, 1938, Yeats' intro. pp. 19-20.

Having briefly outlined the ramifications of the Hermetic Order, we can broadly say that the literature of this school was based upon the ancient mysteries, chiefly those of Egypt, Chaldea and Greece. All these share a belief in the central doctrine of correspondence between the natural and spiritual worlds which they conceived as interdependent and interlocked. To them man as a microcosm copies the universe as a macrocosm. Evil is no worse than the opposite aspect in the dual nature of the Creator (Demon Est Deus Inversus). One cannot call Him omnipresent, omniscient and infinite, and then divorce Him from evil. In human nature, evil denotes the polarity of matter and spirit, a struggle for life between the two manifest Principles which are one in as much as they are rooted in the Absolute. There is nothing like Christian duality in this system. God is the Unity of which everything has emanated and to which everything will return. Redemption consists of the ascension of man to his original form, the Adam Kadmon whom God created as his co-equal.

The Order taught that perfection, or the restoration of the original unity of being, comes through an effort of will continuing through many incarnations, because one life time is too short for this achievement. Our effort should be directed towards a complete union with God within us or what the Theosophists call

the Higher Self, the Silent Watcher variously called the Genius,
or the Holy Guardian Angel by the Golden Dawn (The Daimon of Yeats.)¹
Yeats promised during one of his initiations to do his utmost to
achieve this end:

... I will, from this day forward, apply myself
to the Great Work -- which is, to purify and exalt
my Spiritual Nature, so that with Divine Aid I
may at length attain to be more than human, and
thus gradually raise and unite myself to my higher
and Divine Genius...²

It is significant that Yeats, who found satisfaction for his
mystic quest in early youth in the teachings of Mohini Chatterji,
should in the last phase of his life pursue the same quest with
another Indian, Shree Purohit Swami. The poet made the acquaintance
of this holy man in 1931, and for four years they were closely
associated. During their friendship, Yeats wrote introductions
to ~~the~~ the Swami's autobiography, An Indian Monk, to a partial
autobiography by the Swami's master, The Holy Mountain, and to the
Swami's translation and annotation of Patanjali's Aphorisms of Yoga.
Yeats expressed his admiration for him by including as many as three
of his English poems (his own translations from the original Hindu
and Urdu) in The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935.

Purohit, unlike Chatterji, did not belong to the school of
Sankara for whom the world was an illusion. For the Swami the

1. See chapter III.

2. Israel Regardie, The Golden Dawn, Vol.II, p. 214.

world was 'part of the splendour of that Being'.¹ Yeats who had been immersed in the study of Zen Buddhism since 1926,² found the philosophy of the Swami most gratifying. The Vedantic and Upanishadic doctrines which he began to expound, identified the foundation of the universe with the spirit in every man. The 'individual self, eater of the fruit of action, is the Universal Self, maker of past and future.'³ At the highest moments of consciousness the individual self, detached from action is aware of this identity. In 1933 Yeats wrote to Olivia Shakespeare:

You can apply much of the Swami thought to our life if you translate it. 'Act and remain apart from action.'⁴

The teachings of the Swami were not different from what Yeats had studied elsewhere. They also tallied with what he had already learnt from D.Suzuki's Essays in Zen Buddhism. Zen, for which Yeats acquired great admiration, also set personal experience against external authority and objective revelation. Its basic idea was to come in touch with the inner workings of our being, and to do this in the most direct way possible, without resorting to anything external or superadded.

In his introduction to An Indian Monk Yeats recorded his intellectual satisfaction with the philosophy of the Swami:

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1. Shree Purohit Swami, An Indian Monk, London, 1932, Yeats' intro. p. xx.
 2. Ursula Bridge (ed.), W.B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence 1901-1937, London, 1953, p. 68.
 3. Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats (trans.), The Ten Principal Upanishads, London, 1937, p. 34.
 4. Allan Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 806.

... Lady Gregory collected with my help the stories in her Visions and Beliefs... We came upon... fragments, ...eccentric, alien, shut off, as it were, under the plate glass of a museum; I had found something of what I wanted but not all, the explanatory intellect had disappeared. When Shri Purohit Swami described his journey... and fitted everything into an ancient discipline, a philosophy that satisfies the intellect, I found all I wanted. 1

Yeats was so stimulated by An Indian Monk that he urged his Indian friend to write the story of his Master's initiation in the Tibet. In 1934 the Swami produced The Holy Mountain in response to the poet's wishes. Yeats found in the new book 'an experience not described elsewhere'.² He predicted that 'for generations writers will refer to it as they will refer to An Indian Monk'.³ He also detected great similarities between Celtic and Indian mythologies:

Shri Purohit Swami protected during his pilgrimage... by a strange dog that disappeared when danger was past, might have been that blessed Cellach... Bhagwan Shri Hamsa's pilgrimage to Mount Kailas, the legendary Meru, and to Lake Manas Sarowa, suggested pilgrimages to Croagh Patrick and to Lough Derg.⁴

In 1935 Yeats sailed with the Swami to Majorca for a rest-cure and collaboration in a translation of the Upanishads. His mind at the time was 'full of Asia, where Hegel says every civilization begins'.⁵ His interest in the Upanishadic philosophy dated from his youth:

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1. Shree Purohit Swami, An Indian Monk, Yeats' intro. p. xviii.
 2. Allan Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 896.
 3. Ibid., p. 823.
 4. P. Allt and Alspach (eds.), The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, New York, 1957, p. 837.
 5. J. Hone, W.B. Yeats 1865-1939, p. 444.

For some forty years my friend George Russell (A.E.)
has quoted me passages from some Upanishad...¹

He was, however, dissatisfied with all the translations he came across for they were full of 'latinised words, hyphenated words and sedentary distortions of unnatural English'.² To him the Upanishads represented what 'grass farmers sang thousands of years ago'³ and he could not understand why scholars 'muddled' and 'muddled' them by their polyglot phrases. When he first met the Swami, he proposed that they should 'go to India and make a translation that would read as though the original had been written in common English'.⁴ When the translation was finished Yeats wrote in the Introduction:

Shree Purohit Swami and I offer to some young
man seeking, like Shakespeare, Dante, Milton,
vast sentiments and generalisations, the oldest
philosophical composition of the world...⁵

On the whole Purohit Swami had reawakened Yeats' old sentiment for Hinduism. As a poet, he understood things better when embodied; and this holy man used to 'illustrate his beliefs with delightful tales and memories'⁶:

... his tales came slowly, they must be waited
for, yet there is enough there to restore the
poetry of the world. I delight in his folk lore
even more than in his philosophy.⁷

Stimulated by his friendship, Yeats wrote between 1933 and 1935

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1. Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats (trans.), The Ten Principal Upanishads, Yeats' intro. p. 7.
 2. Ibid., p. 8.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid., p. 10.
 6. Dorothy Wellesley (ed.), Letters On Poetry, London, 1940, p. 55.
 7. Ibid., p. 56.

a group of philosophical poems and at least one play.¹ The teachings of the Swami were always uppermost in the poet's mind in the last six years of his life:

I have learnt a good deal from the Swami, who suddenly makes all wisdom if you ask him the right questions.²

Woburn Building, Yeats' London quarters, received many interesting visitors from the East, among them was Rabindranath Tagore, the eminent Indian poet. It was not surprising that Yeats should be attracted to a man who looked as if he had stepped out of the Vedic age. The poetry of Tagore was first brought to Yeats' notice by W. Rothenstein³ in the shape of some rough translations from Bengali. Tagore, disclaiming intimate knowledge of the English tongue, invited suggestions for the improvement of his translations. Yeats took up the poems, going through them line by line with Rabindranath, suggesting small changes here and there, but he was always careful not to change the substance, sense or rhythm. The India Society agreed to publish the poems, and Yeats provided an introduction in which he wrote:

I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often to close it lest some stranger would

1. See chapters IV and V.

2. Allan Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 806.

3. Stephen Gwynn (ed.), Scattering Branches, London, 1940, p. 44.

see how it moved me. These lyrics... display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life. The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes.¹

Tagore wrote to Yeats years later of the 'great mastery of the English language' which he owed to 'intimate instruction in a quiet little room off Euston Road.'²

Another visitor who was always welcome at his 'Monday evenings' was Sarjini Naidu, the poetess and nationalist. J. Hone sketches for us some of the topics Yeats discussed with the poetess and her colleagues:

...he [Yeats] did not confine his enquiry into contemporary Indian culture to the poetry of Tagore or to the philosophical disquisitions of Tagore's brother, the saintly Dwijendranath Tagore. His attention was attracted to the life and work of Toru Dutt, another Bengali poet and essayist, and he placed before Mr. Harihar Das a project for an annual gathering in India similar to the Welsh Eisteddfod...³

To sum up, we can say that Yeats saw the East and the West as a pair of opposites; the antithetical and the primary. To him the East was not only India and China but also 'the East that has affected European civilization, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Egypt'.⁴ Europe, he thought, was getting 'very old' and it was time 'to copy the East and live deliberately'.⁵ According to A Vision we are

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1. Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali, London, 1919, Yeats' intro. p. xiii.
 2. J. Hone, W.B. Yeats 1865-1939, p. 263.
 3. Ibid., p. 264.
 4. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 257.
 5. W.B. Yeats, 'The Cutting of an Agate', Essays, p. 282.

approaching phase one, or the beginning of a new dispensation which 'the antithetical East will beget upon the primary West and the child or era so born will be antithetical.'¹

Yeats always sought to bring his mind 'close to the mind of Indian and Japanese poets'² because he found contemporary European art largely unimaginative; a mechanical trick of setting a piece of the world as we know it before us. He also suspected that modern civilization was a conspiracy to paralyse men's minds :

I ceased to read modern books that are not books of imagination, and if some philosophic idea interested me, I tried to trace it back to its earliest use, believing that there must be a tradition of belief older than any European Church, and founded upon the experience of the world before the modern bias. 3

His feelings towards Asia, however, were mixed, and dependent upon which aspect he was writing about. For the most part he conceived of Asia as having positive values of simplicity, naturalness, imagination, prescribed duties, and tradition, and the negative attributes of formlessness, immensity and submissiveness which helped to make it the matrix from which everything has come. He was pleased to find that many ancient fragments of pagan Irish philosophy were Asiatic in tone : 4

... our genuflections discover in the East something

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 257.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', Essays, p. 507.
 3. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, p. 265.
 4. Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats (trans.), The Ten Principal Upanishads, Yeats' intro. p. 11.

ancestral in ourselves, something we must bring into the light before we can appease a religious instinct that for the first time in our civilization demands the satisfaction of the whole man.¹

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Having briefly surveyed the Eastern and pseudo-Eastern influences on Yeats, we shall now consider some of the vexing questions that critics often encounter in this connection.

The history of civilization is to a large extent the battle of the rational against the irrational. Whenever the movement of the rational, whether in the form of philosophy or science, has been at its height, it has unfailingly brought about a counter movement of folk-belief, ceremonial magic, supernaturalism, occultism or mysticism. All over Europe the young men of Yeats' generation refused to accept the universe that their scientific materialist and rationalist elders tried to hand down to them. Science had disproved orthodox conceptions of the making of the world and of man, and had implied a threat to every traditional attitude. The feeling of alienation which beset so many artists of the time caused them to seek spiritual citizenship elsewhere, whether in the currents of semi-mystical thought or in the realm of non-European philosophies.

1. Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats (trans.), The Ten Principal Upanishads, Yeats' intro.p. 11.

Yeats would hardly have turned to the East and to occult research had a movement in that direction not been under way. In Letters To The New Island he spoke of the Hermetic Students as 'one of the many societies in which the wave of occult thought swept through Great Britain and the Continent in the eighties'.¹ In the 'Epilogue' to his Essays he wrote:

When I went for the first or second time [to Paris]
Mallarmé had just written 'All our age is full of
the trembling of the veil of the temple'. One met
everywhere young men of letters who talked of magic...
I met from time to time with the German poet
Douthenday, a grave Swede whom I only discovered
after years to have been Strindberg, then looking
for the philosopher's stone in a lodging near the
Luxembourg...²

Indeed many artists and literary men shared Yeats' preoccupation: Lawrence Binyon studied Chinese and Japanese painting; Florence Farr and Sturge Moore studied Buddhism; Ezra Pound and Arthur Waley translated Japanese and Chinese; and in America where Emerson and Whitman had already turned to the East, T.S. Eliot was applying himself to Sanskrit. On the other hand, this was the time when Max Müller was publishing his translations of the wisdom literature of the East, d'Arbois de Jubainville was at work on Celtic materials and Sir James Frazer was about to publish The Golden Bough (1890). Yeats was undoubtedly right when he said that George Russell's 'preoccupation with the East' expressed 'a need and a curiosity

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1. W.B. Yeats, Letters To The New Island, Cambridge, Mass., 1934, pp. 7-8.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', Essays, p. 536.

of our time'.¹

From this argument it becomes abundantly clear that Professor W.H. Auden's attack on Yeats' occultism is unfair and unjust.²

To point to his cosmology and his concern with the occult as an isolated and eccentric phenomenon is simply to sacrifice one man for the sins of a whole generation of poets and artists.

Yeats' attitude to Christianity is another problem which has caused a great controversy among critics. Some prefer to think that he stood outside the faith while others defend his Christianity on various grounds. To Sir Herbert Grierson he is 'a poet mystically inclined for whom the Christian religion had as little significance as modern science.'³ T.R. Henn categorically states that 'he was incapable of accepting Christianity'.⁴ On the other hand, Dorothy Wellesley thinks of Yeats as an Irish Protestant,⁵ while R. Hayes tries to pull him towards the Catholic fold.⁶

Madame Blavatsky attacked in her books all current religions, especially Christianity, and accused the priesthood of responsibility for modern materialism. The priests had perverted doctrines originally true, and left them only husks that cannot satisfy. To her Christ was just one of the several Spiritual Saviours who dispense light. But Christianity, as shaped by history, represented a departure

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1. Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats (trans.), The Ten Principal Upanishads, Yeats' intro. pp. 8-9.
 2. W.H. Auden, 'Yeats as an Example', The Kenyon Review, Spring, 1948, pp. 187-195.
 3. V.K.N. Menon, The Development of William Butler Yeats, Edinburgh, 1942, intro. p. ix.
 4. T.R. Henn, The Lonely Tower, London, 1950, p. xviii.
 5. D. Wellesley (ed.), Letters on Poetry, p. 195.
 6. R. Hayes, 'W.B. Yeats, A Catholic Poet?' Irish Monthly, April, 1928.

from the central parent doctrine which was common to all ancient wisdom and in this respect it 'wrought a change for the worse in the policy of centuries'.¹

The work of the Schoolmen, the Puritans and the modern scientists had vitiated the relations between Christianity and the unseen, and Yeats, as far as his poetry was concerned, never thought of it as a solution of his difficulties:

... What can the Christian confessor say to those who more and more must make all out of the privacy of their thought, calling up perpetual images of desire, for he cannot say 'Cease to be artist, cease to be poet', where the whole life is art and poetry, nor can he bid men leave the world... Why are these strange souls born everywhere to-day, with hearts that Christianity, as shaped by history, cannot satisfy.²

In other words Yeats found the solution of the Church too abstract, turning too much away from the world whose physical beauty the poet must love as much as spiritual beauty.

George Russell (A.E.) once complained that Christianity 'possessed no cosmogony, no psychology, only a most perfect ethic'³ and Yeats reached the same conclusion when he came to contrast the philosophy of Dante with that of Blake:

This philosophy was the philosophy of soldiers, of men of the world, of priests busy with government, of all who, because of the absorption in active life, have been persuaded to judge and to punish...⁴

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1. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.I, p. xxv.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, pp. 314-315.
 3. George Russell (A.E.), The Living Torch, London, 1937, pp. 44-45.
 4. W.B. Yeats, 'Ideas of Good and Evil', Essays, p. 158.

He also thought that Christianity broke up a historical pattern of order and knowledge within whose framework men had been able to achieve Unity of Being. It ushered in 'a fabulous formless darkness'¹ which dissolved all the constructions of previous civilizations:

Odour of blood when Christ was slain
Made all Platonic tolerance vain
And vain all Doric discipline.²

The most decisive factor in Yeats' thinking was the fact that Christianity taught the helplessness of man; his utter dependence on an outside Providence and an outside Saviour. He could not accept the Christian tendency to regard Godhead as something external to humanity, and thus outside the Self. In 1896 he wrote to a new member of the Hermetic Society, 'I am convinced that for you progress lies not in dependence upon a Christ outside yourself but upon the Christ in your own breast, in the power of your own divine will and not in some external will however divine. We [in the Hermetic Society] certainly do teach this dependence only on the inner divinity.'³ He later wrote in A Vision:

God is now conceived of as something outside man...
the world is changed into a featureless dust and
can be run through the fingers... and this Church,
as the gyre sweeps wider, will make man also
featureless as clay or dust. Night will fall
upon man's wisdom now that man has been taught
that he is nothing.⁴

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'Two Songs from a Play', The Collected Poems, p. 240.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Allan Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, pp. 261-262.
 4. W.B. Yeats, A Vision, (1937), pp. 273-274.

Yeats did not condemn this Christian conception without experience, for as a young man, he had known this sense of dependence:

Close to Inchy Wood...I felt, all of a sudden, and only for a second, an emotion which I said to myself was the root of Christian mysticism. There had swept over me a sense of weakness, of dependence upon a great personal Being somewhere far off yet near at hand.¹

The poet found, on the other hand, the conception of an outside deity completely alien to the nature of the Vedic and the Platonic traditions. In them personal experience is strongly set against objective revelation. If a Vedantic Brahmin is asked whether he believes in the existence of God, he would answer 'I am myself God'.² It seemed natural to Yeats that an objective thinker would tend towards Christianity while a subjective one would find the religions of the East more congenial. He preferred to see deity in the Self and tried later to systematise the two opposing disciplines in A Vision. He assigned all types of human personality to either the objective (primary) or the subjective (antithetical) category.³ To him the history of civilization is the alternation of these two traditions:

At the birth of Christ religious life becomes primary ... A primary dispensation looking beyond itself towards a transcendent power is dogmatic, levelling, unifying, feminine... an antithetical dispensation obeys immanent power, is expressive, hierarchichal, multiple, masculine... The approaching antithetical

1. W.B. Yeats, The Celtic Twilight, London, 1902, p. 115.

2. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.1, p. 636.

3. For a detailed discussion of Yeats' belief in the subjective tradition see F.A. Wilson, W.B. Yeats and Tradition, pp. 15-34.

influx... for which the intellectual preparation has begun will reach its complete systematisation at that moment when... the Great Year comes to its intellectual climax.¹

Yeats looked upon Christianity with the indifference of a man who was witnessing the closing chapter of a historical era:

Perhaps Christianity was good and the world liked it, so now it is going away and the immortals are beginning to awake.²

Once when continually ill in 1937, wrote Mrs. Yeats, he rang the bell for her in the night and asked her to stay with him for a while and said, 'When I am ill I feel I am becoming a Christian and I hate that.'³

We should not omit to mention, however, that Yeats favoured an early form of esoteric Christianity which he connected with the pre-Patrick Celtic Church and with the Eastern Christianity of Egyptian monks. Both Churches understood Christianity and interpreted it in the light of the ancient Mysteries. They also retained many pre-Christian beliefs in their ritual. The theological teachings of the Egyptian Church were formulated from the Greek ideality and Oriental mysticism in which Egyptian and Jewish ideas were blended and embedded. The monks certainly rejected the old gods of the country, but the folk-lore survived and with it the beliefs

1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 263.

2. W.B. Yeats, The Tables of The Law and The Adoration of The Magi, London, 1904, p. 55.

3. Peter Allt, 'Yeats, Religion, and History', Sewanee Review, Autumn, 1952, p. 648.

which belonged to the mythology of a remote past. In a commentary on the 'Supernatural Songs' Yeats discussed the early Church of Ireland:

... I associate early Christianity with India...
Saint Patrick must have found in Ireland, for he
was not its first missionary, men whose Christianity
had come from Egypt, and retained characteristics
of those older faiths that have become so important
to our invention.¹

Like most people whose beliefs are violently opposed to the common climate of opinion, Yeats tended to hide his convictions under a thick, misleading veil:

I was always ready to deny or turn into a joke
what was for all that my secret fanaticism.²

This attitude of a timid man gave rise to the theory, popular among many critics, that the poet turned to mysticism and the East solely to enrich his art. Yeats, they claimed, was primarily a poet and not a religious seeker. This dichotomy has misled many people into false conclusions. To Yeats the distinction between religion and poetry was unthinkable; there was no question of having to choose between them:

For there is only one perfection and only one
search for perfection, and it sometimes has the
form of the religious life and sometimes of the
artistic life.³

A casual look at some of the poet's unpublished notebooks would be sufficient to convince anybody that he really believed in the

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1. W.B. Yeats, The King of the Great Clock Tower: Commentaries and Poems, Dublin, 1934, pp. 44-45.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'Reveries Over Childhood and Youth', Autobiographies, pp. 78-79.
 3. W.B. Yeats, 'Ideas of Good and Evil', Essays, p. 255.

Theosophical and Hermetic doctrines embedded in his poetry. He certainly took magic seriously and was at various times of his life the subject of some supernatural occurrences:

I too have had such experience and others
'spiritualistic' in type which I shall publish
when ready -- to adopt a metaphor from Erasmus--
to make myself a post for dogs and journalists
to defile.¹

Yeats was more obsessed with occultism, mysticism, and psychical research than he allowed to appear, partly because of solemn vows of secrecy and partly because he was sensitive to mockery. His fear of ridicule remained with him to the end. In the 'Last Poems' he wrote:

Because there is safety in derision
I talked about an apparition,
I took no trouble to convince,
Or seem plausible to a man of sense,
Distrustful of that popular eye...²

Esotericism was Yeats' consuming passion and many facts in his life story prove beyond a doubt that he was genuinely preoccupied with the arcane. To him it was not a contradiction but an extension of his childhood religion. He wanted to secure proof that experimental science was limited in its results, in an age when science made extravagant claims.

It is legitimate at this point to ask whether Yeats was conscious

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1. W.B. Yeats, Pages from a Diary Written in Nineteen Hundred and Thirty, p. 46.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'The Apparition', The Collected Poems, pp. 386-387.

of the distinction between mysticism and magic. He was neither a mystic of the orthodox type like George Russell(A.E.) and Tagore, nor was he a mystic in the general sense of being a partaker of those vague qualities which we usually associate with the term. His was a peculiar brand of mysticism founded upon the knowledge secretly imparted to him in the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society and the instructions he received in the Isis-Urania Temple of the Hermetic Students. If Yeats had mixed up magic and mysticism, he was only following Sinnett, Blavatsky and Mathers who made no radical distinction between the two. To them magic and the occult sciences were essentially the 'most spiritual'¹ part of the mystic's training, and manipulation of the obscure forces of nature was the proof of adeptship. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Yeats in 1892 writing of mysticism and magic as one and the same:

Now as to Magic. It is surely absurd to hold me 'weak' or otherwise because I chose to persist in a study which I decided deliberately four or five years ago to make, next to my poetry, the most important pursuit of my life... The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write.²

He was taught to look upon magic as a quick method of achieving what the conventional mystic laboriously achieved by the practice of austerities and concentration. In other words, he thought of ascending the ladder towards the source of spiritual and material

1. A.P. Sinnett, Esoteric Buddhism, London, 1883, p. 29.

2. Allan Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, pp. 210-211.

power not by annihilating his individuality but by use of spells, symbols and ritual until at last he could raise his mind to the point where it would transcend itself. The fact that Yeats followed this unorthodox conception, which confused the spiritual and the naturalistic, and mixed up union with God and union with the elemental forces, does not imply that he was unaware of the traditional type of mysticism. He readily accepted what Blavatsky and Mathers taught because it was congenial to him as an artist:

The systematic mystic is not the greatest of artists, because his imagination is too great to be bound by a picture or a song...¹

1. W.B. Yeats, 'Ideas of Good and Evil', Essays, p. 185.

II

CELTIC MYTHOLOGY AND ORIENTAL CLUES

'It was from the East that Yeats snatched
the clue to the interpretation of the
Druidic culture...'

John Eglinton¹

'All through the winter I watched Mr Yeats
correlating folk lore (which Lady Gregory
had collected in Irish cottages) and data
of the occult writers...'

Ezra Pound²

The dreamy, languid and nostalgic verse of Yeats' early period is often dismissed as a continuation of the autumnal and decadent poetry of the fin de siècle. There is no doubt that the style and the subject matter of his very early poems reveal a heterogeneous effort in the direction of the aesthetes whom his father taught him to admire. However, we cannot dispose of the whole period in this sweeping fashion. Although the pre-Raphaelite diction

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1. John Eglinton, 'Yeats and his Story', The Dial, May, 1926, p. 358.
 2. E. Pound and E. Fenollosa, 'Noh' or Accomplishment, London, 1916, p. 44.



of his poetry remained the same throughout this phase, Yeats' inspiration after 1885 came from a different quarter. With the appearance of the Indian missionary, Mohini Chatterji, on the scene, a new note entered his poetry. The random attempts of the first two or three years of creative activity gave place to a consistent vision that possessed the sanction of an authoritative religion. The influence of Chatterji on the young mystics of Dublin was of the profoundest. George Moore firmly believed that most of what George Russell (A.E.) wrote was inspired by the Brahmin's disquisitions:

... his [A.E.'s] life did not take its definite direction until an Indian missionary arrived in Dublin... A.E. had gone to him instinctively as to a destiny; and a few months later the Upanishads and the Vedas were born again in verse and in prose...¹

As late as 1900 Yeats spoke of Mohini in 'The Way of Wisdom' as one who helped to give his vague thoughts a shape:

I had thought to write of one to whom I, at any rate, owe more than to any book...²

The Sankara philosophy which the Indian began to unfold to his disciples taught that the whole complex of phenomena, when we regard it from the point of view of ultimate reality, is created, maintained, and imposed upon the soul by ignorance. It springs from false cognition and is merely a deceptive supposition:

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1. George Moore, Hail and Farewell, London, 1914, Vol.II, (Salve), p.30.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'The Way of Wisdom', The Speaker, April, 1900, p. 40.

... the illusion that a rope is a snake, or that the trunk of a tree is a man, or the mirage is an expanse of water, is disproved on a closer examination and disappears. The whole world is an illusion which Brahma as magician evolves from himself, and by which he is no more affected than is the magician by the illusion which he has produced.¹

Chatterji accordingly taught that the external life of action is illusory, ephemeral and unreal. The real life was that of dreaming, imagination, and contemplation. Only the Self was worth thinking about, for all that mattered was centred in it. To go beyond the Self was to leave the truth behind and to run after shadows. In brief, what appeared to be shadowy was substantial and what looked substantial was shadowy. This idea soon found its way to Yeats' poetry:

Wisdom and dreams are one,
For dreams are the flowers ablow,
And Wisdom the fruit of the garden:
God planted him long ago.²

Occasionally the poet also transvalues the word 'dream' so that the world of appearance is the dream, and the world of dream is the reality:

... Niamh calling Away, come away!
Empty your heart of its mortal dream?³

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1. Paul Deussen, Outline of the Vedanta System of Philosophy according to Shankara, Cambridge Mass., 1906, pp. 24-25.
 2. Peter Allt and Russell Alspach (eds.), The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 743.
 3. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 61.

The Brahmin taught, as Yeats tells us in 'The Way of Wisdom', that one has to suppress all desire, even the desire for emancipation, 'for even our desire of immortality was no better than our other desires.'¹ The poem 'Quatrains and Aphorisms', published in The Dublin University Review in 1886, is related to this particular injunction of Mohini:

Long thou for nothing, neither sad nor gay;
Long thou for nothing, neither night nor day;
Not even 'I long to see thy longing over';²
To the ever-longing and mournful spirit say.

In the next quatrain of the poem he declares that salvation or entry into the gates of Brahma is not to be obtained through good or pious deeds, but by meditation, by feeding upon one's desires, by consuming one's own heart:

The ghosts went by me with their lips apart
From death's late languor as these lines I read
On Brahma's gateway, 'They within have fed
The soul upon the ashes of the heart.'³

In 'The Pathway' Yeats confesses that as he listened to Chatterji he felt 'that all action and all words that lead to action were a little vulgar, a little trivial.'⁴ These words are echoed in 'The Priest and the Fairy' :

... 'the only good is musing mild,
And evil still is action's child.
With action all the world is vexed.'⁵

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'The Way of Wisdom', The Speaker, April, 1900, p. 40
 2. Peter Allt and Russell Alspach (eds.), The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 734.
 3. Ibid., pp. 734-735.
 4. W.B. Yeats, 'The Pathway', The Collected Works, Vol.VIII, p. 196.
 5. Op.Cit. p. 728.

It was also in this mood that he wrote 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd'; the earth was no solid reality, only a little dust under our feet:

The wandering earth herself may be
Only a sudden flaming word,
In clanging space a moment heard,
Troubling the endless reverie.¹

The conclusion he draws is:

Then no wise worship dusty deeds,
Nor seek, for this is also sooth,
To hunger fiercely after truth,
Lest all thy toiling only breeds
New dreams, new dreams; there is no truth
Saving in thine own heart.²

Here is all the consciousness of the triviality and vulgarity of action in 'the dusty deeds', even hunger after truth is to be abandoned; for after all it is a hunger and can only breed desires and illusions. The truth is in one's heart; the soul should feed on 'the ashes of the heart'. Had not the Brahmin said, 'Consciousness... does not merely spread out its surface but has, in vision and in contemplation, another motion and can change in height and in depth' ?³

In 'Fergus and the Druid' Yeats uses the conflict of the active and contemplative impulses within Fergus to dramatise the same theme in a dialogue between the King and a Druid priest. Fergus, having

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p.7.

2. Ibid., pp. 7 - 8.

3. W.B. Yeats, 'Reveries Over Childhood and Youth', Autobiographies, p. 92.

just renounced his throne and given the sceptre to Conchubar, is attempting to learn mystic meditation from the man of religion. Conchubar, all things considered, is better fitted for the life of action.

... what to me was burden without end,
To him seemed easy, so I laid the crown
Upon his head to cast away my sorrow.1

When he explains this, the Druid asks, 'What would you, King of the proud Red Branch Kings ? ' Fergus replies:

As late as 1920 the same conception recurs in 'A Meditation in Time of War' where the poet repudiates life as a fantasy:

The nostalgia for a dream-world which is all knowledge and no action, reached its culmination in The Shadowy Waters, a dramatic poem.

Forgael. All would be well
 Could we but give us wholly to the dreams,
 And get into their world that to the sense
 Is shadow, and not linger wretchedly

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 36.
2. Peter Allt and Russell Alspach (eds.), The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 103.
3. Op.Cit., p. 214.

Among substantial things; for it is dreams
That lift us to the flowing, changing world
That the heart longs for.¹

Yeats concludes the speech by borrowing an image from Chatterji who taught 'that we ourselves are nothing but a mirror and that deliverance consists in turning the mirror away'.²

Fellow-wanderer,
Could we but mix ourselves into a dream,
Not in its image on the mirror!³

If we compare The Shadowy Waters with the Irish Imran Brain, for example, we find that although both are voyages in quest of perfect happiness, the Irish poem has nothing dreamy or shadowy about it. It implies no repudiation of reality and no flight from substantial things as The Shadowy Waters does. On the contrary, the ideal of happiness expressed in it is but an intensification and idealisation of substantial things.⁴

On the whole, Yeats' imagination was so stirred at the time by Chatterji's fresh approach to life that he developed a general interest in India and Indian poetry in particular. Mohini drew his attention to the works of Kālidāsa, the great classical poet, and he managed to read some of it in translation. Discussing the poet's early period, C.L. Wrenn writes:

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, pp. 480-481.
 2. Ursula Bridge (ed.), W.B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence, 1901-1937, p. 68.
 3. Op. Cit., p. 481.
 4. See F. Shaw, 'The Celtic Element in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats', Studies, June, 1934, p. 276.

There was one period in his early life when his imagination was captivated and stimulated by India — not the India of politicians or historians or travellers, but an India of pure romance which bears some subtle yet obvious relation to old romantic Ireland.¹

The Seeker, a dramatic poem which has not been included in any volume of Yeats' collected works since 1889, has the romantic trappings of an Indian background:

Shepherds, I come this morning to your land
From threescore years of dream-led wandering
Where spice-isles nestle on the star-trod seas,
And where the polar winds and waters wrestle
In endless dark, and by the weedy marge
Of India's rivers, rolling on in light.²

Although Mosada, published in 1886, is a Moorish play, the heroine manages to talk of the 'India of romance' without any reasonable justification:

Ah! now I am Eastern-hearted once again,
.....
I'll sing the songs the dusky lovers sing,
Wandering in sultry palaces of Ind,
A lotus in their hands —³

The poem 'Jealousy', which appears in The Collected Poems under the title 'Anashuya and Vijaya', makes full use of the knowledge Yeats had gathered about India from Chatterji. It also reproduces the arcadian atmosphere of Kalidāsa's play Sakuntala, which he had

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1. C.L. Wrenn, W.B. Yeats: A Literary Study, London, 1920, p. 9.
 2. Peter Allt and Russell Alspach (eds.), The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 682.
 3. Ibid., p. 694.

read in the translation of Monier Williams. The poem uses as a theme the conflict within an Indian priestess that makes her fluctuate between meditation and jealousy. Yeats has evidently taken the name 'Anashuya' from Kālidāsa's play. The scene is also very much like the hermitage of Kanva where Sakuntala is brought up with her two playmates Anashuya and Priamvada. The poem celebrates the Tibetan adepts in memorable lines:

Anashuya. Swear by the parents of the gods,
Dread oath, who dwell on sacred Himalay,
On the far Golden Peak; enormous shapes,
Who still were old when the great sea was young;
On their vast faces mystery and dreams.¹

Yeats put the conception of unity in human life and nature into a dramatic monologue, 'The Indian to his Love'

While our love grows an Indian star,
A meteor of the burning heart,
One with the tide that gleams, the wings that gleam
and dart...²

The poem produces a perfect atmosphere in which the mind feels a convinced restfulness and a surety of real surroundings. The Indian and his love are approaching an island he describes to her:

The island dreams under the dawn
And great boughs drop tranquillity;
The peahens dance on a smooth lawn,
A parrot sways upon a tree,
Raging at his own image in the ~~dim~~ enamelled sea.³

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 13.
 2. Ibid., pp. 15-16.
 3. Ibid., p. 15.

When some critic objected that 'peahens' do not dance, Yeats wrote:

... peahens... dance throughout the whole of Indian poetry. If I had Kalidasa by me I could find many such dancings. As to the poultry yards, with them I have no concern. The wild peahen dances or all Indian poets lie.¹

✓ Another monologue, 'The Indian Upon God', which was originally published under the awkward title 'From the Book of Kauri the Indian-- Section V. on the Nature of God', reflects the intellectual thrill that Yeats' youthful mind obtained from a fresh idea. The Indian discovers that the personal conception of the divinity is a magnified form of the 'Self' of the thinker. According to the moor-fowl, God

Is an undying moorfowl, and He lives beyond the sky.
The rains are from His dripping wing, the moonbeams from
His eye.²

To the lotus God is He

Who made the world and ruleth it, He hangeth on a stalk,
For I am in His image made, and all this tinkling tide
Is but a sliding drop of rain between His petals wide.³

The peacock says:

Who made the grass and made the worms and made my feathers
gay,
He is a monstrous peacock, and He waveth all the night
His languid tail above us, lit with myriad spots of light.⁴

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1. Allan Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 109.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 14.
 3. Ibid., p. 15.
 4. Ibid.

The idea of the poem probably came from the Bhagavad Gîtâ translated by Chatterji. The Blessed Lord spoke:

Among Âdityas I am Vishnu; among those who
illuminate I am the sun...
Among weapons I am the thunder... among serpents
I am Vasuki.
... I am the lion among wild animals; among
birds I am Garuda.
... among fishes I am Makara; among
flowing streams I am the Ganges.¹

The notion that the soul passes through round after round of lives was among the many concepts that Yeats adopted from the teachings of Mohini and the Dublin Theosophists. His interest in reincarnation was aroused early in life through his friend George Russell (A.E.), who was precociously versed in all the Indian literature that had been translated. Chatterji taught that souls are emanations of the divine spirit, sparks from the central fire; that each soul is incarnated in a body times without number, and that birth and death go on until the soul returns to the divine source whence it came.

Somebody asked him [Chatterji] if we should pray, but even prayer was too full of hope, of desire, of life, to have any part in that acquiescence that was his beginning of wisdom, and he answered that one should say, before sleeping : 'I have lived many lives. I have been a slave and a prince. Many a beloved has sat upon my knees, and I have sat upon the knees of many a beloved.

1. M. Chatterji, (trans.), Bhagavad Gîtâ, Boston, 1887, pp. 163-166.

Everything that has been shall be again.'
Beautiful words, that I spoilt once by
turning them into clumsy verse.¹

Yeats turned this reported conversation into verse in 'Kanva on
Himself' :

Now wherefore hast thou tears innumerable ?
Hast thou not known all sorrow and delight
.....

And as a slave been wakeful in the halls
Of Rajas and Mahrajas beyond number ?
Hast thou not ruled among gilded walls ?
Hast thou not known a Raja's dreamless slumber ?

Hast thou not sat of yore upon the knees
Of myriads of beloved, and on thine
Have not a myriad swayed below strange trees
In other lives ? 2

Mohini meant that one should realize the permanence of the soul
as regards its eternal essence amidst all the transient forms
through which it has passed. Many years later Yeats did not
hesitate to use the same idea in another poem, 'Mohini Chatterji',
which restates the theme of the ancestral self and of cosmic
unity:

I asked if I should pray,
But the Brahmin said,
'Pray for nothing, say
Every night in bed,
'I have been a king,
I have been a slave,
Nor is there anything,

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'The Pathway', The Collected Works, Vol.VIII, p. 193.
 2. Peter Allt and Russell Alspach (eds.), The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, pp. 723-724.

Fool, rascal, knave,
That I have not been,
And yet upon my breast
A myriad heads have lain'...
Birth is heaped on birth
That such cannonade
May thunder time away...1

The poem 'Death' in The Winding Stairs has the same idea as 'Mohini Chatterji', although it refers to the death of Kevin O'Higgins :

A man awaits his end
Dreading and hoping all;
Many times he died,
Many times rose again.2

It was natural for Yeats to have adopted reincarnation, the pre-natal memory and all the other articles of Chatterji's faith.

He was satisfied with a conception that made man's soul a thing of immense stature and extended its experience over enormous vistas of time. Besides, the words of the Indian gave him hope whenever he felt death approaching. In 'Quarrel in Old Age' he wrote:

All lives that has lived;
So much is certain;
Old sages were not deceived...3

And in 'Under Ben Bulbin' :

Many times man lives and dies
Between his two eternities...4

The poet alludes to the teachings of the Brahmin in 'All Souls'

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, pp. 279-280.
 2. Ibid., p. 264.
 3. Ibid., p. 286.
 4. Ibid., p. 398.

Night', a poem which was meant to be an epilogue to A Vision. Referring to his friend Florence Farr, who entered a Vedantist seminary in Ceylon, Yeats wrote:

Before that end much had she ravelled out
From a discourse in figurative speech
By some learned Indian
On the soul's journey. How it is whirled about,
Wherever the orbit of the moon can reach,
Until it plunge into the sun...¹

The 'learned Indian' is Chatterji, who was also Miss Farr's teacher. Although Mohini is not referred to by name in A Vision, we find a detailed description of his character and philosophy under the phase of the saint. The Mask of the saint of the twenty-seventh phase is 'renunciation' and his Body of Fate is 'none except impersonal action'. The joy of the saint is 'to be nothing, to do nothing, to think nothing.'² Chatterji's advice that people should be taught that they do 'not possess even their bodies'³ is also echoed in Yeats' description:

... he [the saint] no longer even possesses his own body, that he must renounce even his desire for his own salvation, and that his total life is in love with his nothingness.⁴

By the early 'nineties Yeats had learnt how to employ ideas in a larger context. He was delighted to discover hints of the rebirth cycle in ancient Irish legends, for it thus became part of the tradition of his own country and the West as well as of

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 258.
 2. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 180.
 3. W.B. Yeats, 'The Pathway', The Collected Works, Vol. VIII, p. 194.
 4. Op. Cit., p. 181.

the East :

It pleases me to fancy that when we turn towards the East, in or out of church, we are turning not less to the ancient west and north; the one fragment of pagan Irish philosophy come down, 'The Song of Amergin', seems Asiatic; that system of thought like that of these books [the Vedas and the Upanishads] , though perhaps less perfectly organized, once overspread the world....1

The only difference between the Celtic and the Eastern doctrines of reincarnation is that rebirth in the former is a privilege and not a punishment. Thus the idea of justice which dominates the Hindu doctrine is absent from the Celtic conception. However, Yeats was soon weaving poems on the pattern of 'Kanva on Himself' and 'Mohini Chatterji' with figures from Irish instead of Hindu lore. Fergus, in 'Fergus and the Druid', succeeds in persuading the priest to grant him access to the world of pure dream and discovers in this way all the lives he had lived in the past :

Fergus. I see my life go drifting like a river
From change to change; I have been many things--
A green drop in the surge, a gleam of light
Upon a sword, a fir-tree on a hill,
An old slave grinding at a heavy quern,
A king sitting upon a chair of gold--
And all these things were wonderful and great...2

The soul according to the Celts underwent an evolution, from the

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1. Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats (trans.), The Ten Principal Upanishads, Yeats' intro. p. 11.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 37.

soul-atom to mankind, then upward from a slave to a king on his throne. In fact, Yeats never ceased to be concerned with the idea of rebirth nor did he leave any doubt in the reader's mind that he had accepted it. The subject frequently recurs in many of the poems of the middle and late periods. In the poem 'On Woman' from The Wild Swans at Coole he writes :

What else He give or keep
God grant me -- no, not here,
For I am not so bold
To hope a thing so dear
Now ~~that~~ I am growing old,
But when, if the tale's true,
The Pestle of the moon
That pounds up all anew
Brings me to birth again—
To find what once I had
And know what once I have known...¹

In the notes to the Guala Press edition of Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1920), Yeats explains that the poem, 'An Image from a Past Life', is based on the thought that our lives are haunted by memories of past lives, and that in some circumstances one may see the forms of those whom he has loved in some past life. These forms are known as Over Shadowers and the woman in the poem sees one of these as it passes through the man's mind without his being conscious of it. (1)

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 165.

She. A sweetheart from another life floats there
As though she had been forced to linger
From vague distress
Or arrogant loveliness,
.....

He. But why should you grow suddenly afraid
And start -- I at your shoulder --
Imagining
That any night could bring
An image up ...¹

The theme of the poem is taken from Tagore's 'In the Dusky Path of a Dream', which Yeats included in the Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935; it begins, 'In the dusky path of a dream I went to seek the love who was mine in a former life'.² In 'The Three Hermits' the poet presents the different points of view on the question of rebirth. The theory that man can never reincarnate as animal after reaching the human stage had been hotly debated in the Theosophical Society.³ The second hermit in the poem says:

... it's plain to be discerned
That the shades of holy men
Who have failed, being weak of will,
Pass the Door of Birth again,
And are plagued by crowds, until
They've the passion to escape.'
Moaned the other, 'They are thrown
Into some most fearful shape.'
But the second mocked his moan:
'They are not changed to anything,
Having loved God once, but maybe
To a poet or a king...'⁴

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 201.
 2. W.B. Yeats (ed.), The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935, Oxford, 1936, p. 66.
 3. See H.P. Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled, Vol. I, p. 179 and A.P. Sinnett, Esoteric Buddhism, pp. 205-206.
 4. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 127.

Concurrent with Yeats' interest in the work of the Irish Theosophists was his preoccupation with Irish folk-lore. During his early youth the controversy as to the nature and origin of Druidism, which had sprung up in 1726 on the publication of Toland's Critical History, had swelled to an enormous size. Books on the subject were being continually published, but the information to be gleaned was similar in each case, for the reason that the primary sources were very scanty. The speculation as to the origin of the Druids varied. Were they Atlanteans, Hindu Brahmins, Phoenician priests, or Egyptian seers ? Yeats was concerned with the Druids as repositories of an ancient esoteric knowledge. John Rhys, in 1882, dealt with the problem then uppermost in Yeats' mind: The Celts' religion. Working from inscriptions on coins and monuments, Rhys declared that their religion was similar to that of all the other Aryans, and with a similar pantheon. Rhys' Hibbert Lectures on the Celtic religion, published in 1888, made it clear that the Celtic invaders of Aryan stock brought their gods with them. The lectures work out a parallelism between the Irish gods and their Hindu, Persian, and Greek counterparts, comparing the Celtic hero Gwydion, for instance, with the Hindu Indra. Arbois de Jubainville's book, The Irish Mythological Cycle and Celtic Mythology, contributed much to Yeats' understanding of

Celtic doctrines particularly that of transmigration. The poet found most of the interpretations of early Celtic religions congenial for they harmonised with what his friends the Theosophists taught.

Yeats' decision, in 1889, that he was not going for the scenery of a poem to any country but his own is usually attributed to the influence of John O'Leary, the Fenian hero. In fact, Yeats' reasons were more literary than national. 'All poetry' he wrote, 'should have a local habitation when at all possible.'¹ He began to introduce minor alterations in his earlier work to give it an Irish air. The lines in his Moorish play, Mosada, which in 1886 had read:

He brings to mind
That song I've made -- is of a Russian tale
Of Holy Peter of the Burning Gate :
A saint of Russia in a vision saw
A stranger new arisen wait
Beside the door of Peter's gate....²

Were by 1889 revised to make the Russian tale 'an Irish tale', and 'a saint of Russia' 'a saint of Munster'. Curiously enough George Russell's poetry began at the same time to teem with Gaelic instead of Hindu names and images. Yeats and Russell had, however, to face the fact that Gaelic folk-lore was fragmentary and incoherent.

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1. K. Tynan, The Middle Years, London, 1916, p. 54.
 2. Peter Allt and Russell Alspach (eds.), The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 696.

What actually remained of the ancient Druidic system — to use Eglinton's expression — was no more than hints and fragments.¹

In The Candle of Vision George Russell wrote:

I will try briefly to reconstruct the Celtic vision of Heaven and Earth as I believe it was known to the Druids and bardic seers. Let no one who requires authority read what I have written for I will give none... Let it be accepted by others as a romantic invention or attribution of divine powers to certain names to make coherent the confusion of Celtic myth.²

Russell could not name his authority, he would rather let 'others accept it as a romantic invention'. The fact is that Russell and Yeats were beginning to see similarities between the gods of the East and those of their own country. Writing about the impact of Theosophy on A.E., Monk Gibbon says:

Theosophy did one thing, it enabled him [A.E.] to adopt the Celtic mythology and make use of it for his own purpose. Presently Angus and Lir and Nuatha were to replace Ananda and Valmihar and Kedar in his writings... he regarded the names of all gods as merely symbols given to certain divine beings or hierarchs, by men in different parts of the world.³

F. Wilson is certainly right when he says that Yeats at this time was also 'remarking on parallels between Celtic and Indian, and even ancient Assyrian symbolism'.⁴ The poet had unequivocally

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1. John Eglinton, Irish Literary Portraits, p. 51.
 2. George Russell, The Candle of Vision, London, 1918, pp. 151-152.
 3. George Russell (A.E.), The Living Torch, pp. 46-47.
 4. F.A. Wilson, W.B. Yeats and Tradition, p. 29.

accepted the argument that all received systems of symbolism are legacies from one original faith. It is not surprising under the circumstances to find Yeats reconstructing the Celtic vision, as Russell did, from the quarries of Theosophy and the East. John Eglinton, one of the prominent figures of the Irish Literary Renaissance, bears witness to the fact:

... it was Yeats who, without knowing a word of Gaelic, penetrated to the esoteric world of Druidic magic... It was from the East that Yeats snatched the clue to the interpretation of the Druidic culture; it was Theosophy which was able to supplement the scanty hints of Druidic mysteries... and to furnish a living system of arcane teaching. Yeats's early poems are in fact as full of Hinduism as of Celticism...¹

Yeats thought that it was perfectly legitimate to borrow from the East for he believed that Irish people 'lived in Asia until the battle of Boyne'.² Eastern folk-lore reminded him of 'our Irish legends and beliefs' and 'the men who created it were more like ourselves than were the Greeks and Romans'.³ In Letters to the New Island he wrote:

Tradition is always the same. The earliest poet of India and the Irish peasant in his hovel nod to each other across the ages, and are in perfect agreement.⁴

Some of Yeats' contemporaries realised what he was doing and ,

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1. John Eglinton, 'Yeats and his Story', The Dial, May, 1926, p. 358.
 2. W.B. Yeats, Wheels and Butterflies, London, 1934, p. 136.
 3. W.B. Yeats, 'The Cutting of an Agate', Essays, p. 288.
 4. W.B. Yeats, Letters to the New Island, p. 204.

as J. Hone tells us, accused him of 'whittling down the spirituality of the Irish until it could appear mere evidence of atavistic tendency or a parody of some Eastern cult.'¹ The poet knew that what he saw and heard among the peasants was 'eccentric, alien, shut off, as it were, under the plate glass of a museum' because 'the explanatory intellect had disappeared.'² A systematisation of these fragments into an integral and living pattern was essential if they were to be useful for his purpose. The Theosophists came readily to his help for they accepted and incorporated into their system ghosts and fairies, and regarded dreams and symbols as supernatural manifestations. What the peasants call fairies, good people or pixies, they explained, are actual beings who live in the astral bodies and become visible in the lonely places. This was acceptable to Yeats for it made all romance as real as mortal life itself. In The Celtic Twilight he declares that fairies and divine people were once human beings:

... [The good people] live out their passionate lives not far off, as I think, and we shall be among them when we die if we but keep our natures simple and passionate. May it not even be that death shall unite us to all romance...³

In 1889 he came to think the Irish word 'Sidhe' and the Sanskrit

'Siddha' (an emancipated person) to be cognate :

'Sidh' (shee), 'a fairy', is, I believe,

1. J. Hone, W.B. Yeats 1865-1939, p. 152.

2. Shree Purohit Swami, An Indian Monk, Yeats' intro. p. xviii.

3. W.B. Yeats, The Celtic Twilight, p. 108.

nearly the same word as the Sanskrit.¹

He also wrote two articles, one in the Irish Theosophist² and one in Lucifer,³ trying to link the Irish and the Theosophical conceptions of ghosts and fairies:

When reading Irish folk-lore, or listening to Irish peasants telling their tales of magic and fairyism and witchcraft, more and more is one convinced that some clue there must be... Clearly the occultist should have his say as well as the folk-loreist... Some of the beliefs about ghosts are theosophical; the Irish ghost or thivish, for instance, is merely an earth-bound shell, fading and whimpering in the places it loved... It is when we come to the fairies and 'fairy doctors', we feel most the want of some clue — some light, no matter how smoky.⁴

Yeats declared that with the publication of The Wanderings of Oisín (1889), his 'subject-matter became Irish'.⁵ The poem is based on translations of an eighteenth-century Irish work and on some poems in Middle-Irish reporting the dialogue between St. Patrick and the pagan Ossian who has come back, bent, blind, but unregenerate, to Christian Ireland after three hundred years in wonderland with his fairy bride. The poet found in Oisín's journey to the 'country of the young' an example of the rise and fall of life. He felt at liberty to transplant and graft one legend upon another and to invent his own variations. He

1. W.B. Yeats, Letters to the New Island, p. 198.

2. W.B. Yeats, 'Invoking the Irish Fairies', Irish Theosophist, October, 1892.

3. W.B. Yeats, 'Irish Fairies, Ghosts, Witches, Etc.', Lucifer, January, 1889.

4. Ibid., p. 399.

5. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, notes p. 523.

interpreted some of the implications in the earlier text and inserted others to suit his purpose. In a letter to Katharine Tynan, in 1888, he wrote, 'In the second part of *Oisín* under disguise of symbolism I have said several things to which I only have the key.'¹ Dr Carter Blake, reviewing the poem in *Lucifer*, the organ of the Theosophical Society, wrote:

... it is really a comfort to have a book of wholesome, ringing verse, which illustrates the theosophical principle that Karma, Nemesis, or Destiny, attends all manifestations of life... Mr Yeats is never so graceful, never so deeply devout, as when expressing the higher mysteries of the theosophical philosophy.²

Many unbiased people, as J. Hone tells us, 'felt that their pleasure in the colour and imaginative energy of the narrative was interrupted by the theosophical hints and suggestions, and asked whether it was in this manner that Irish saga, objective as the Greek, endowed things with dream shape and magical significance.'³

In fact the manner in which Yeats orientalised the material drawn from Irish literature is nowhere more manifest than in *The Wanderings of Oisín*. The spirit of the original dialogues 'is the expression of a people whose occupation and whose joy are the fight and the chase'.⁴ The reality in the original poems

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1. Roger McHugh (ed.), *W.B. Yeats: Letters to Katharine Tynan*, Dublin, 1953, p. 68.
 2. Carter Blake, 'The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems', *Lucifer*, March, 1889, p. 86.
 3. J. Hone, *W.B. Yeats 1865-1939*, p. 62.
 4. Robin Flower, *Byron and Ossian*, Nottingham, 1928, p. 15.

'is that active life under the sky and all its environment of hill and wood and plain and sea'.¹ 'Micheál Guimin's Laoi Oisín ar Thír na n-Og', one of the poems from which Yeats drew his material, gives a very mundane, matter of fact picture of the Celtic wonderland:

No one who reads the poem [Micheál Guimin's Laoi Oisín ar Thír na n-Og] can fail to be struck by the very homely unmythical Tír na n-Og there depicted... in fact the description reads at times like an advertisement for a modern hotel... The king greets Oisín with a hearty handshake and a céad míle fáilte.²

In Yeats' poem instead of meeting a homely king who would greet him in a friendly manner, Oisín is brought to the hall

Where Aengus dreams, from sun to sun,
A Druid dream of the end of days
When the stars are to wane and the world be done.³

The whole poem is permeated by a dream-laden mood and its atmosphere is sluggish, soporific and unreal. The reader moves through a land of 'old silence'⁴ 'Where shadowy face flowed into shadowy face'⁵, and where everybody is lost 'in a reverie forgetful of all things'⁶. In this strange domain dwell beings with 'motionless eyeballs'⁷ full 'with the smoke of their dreams'⁸. Round Oisín move 'Seamen or landmen' with 'cloud-pale eyelids and dream-dimmed

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1. Robin Flower, Byron and Ossian, p. 15.
 2. F. Shaw, 'The Celtic Element in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats', Studies, June, 1934, pp. 272-273.
 3. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 416.
 4. Ibid., p. 432.
 5. Ibid., p. 427.
 6. Ibid., p. 432.
 7. Ibid., p. 440.
 8. Ibid., p. 436.

eyes'.¹ In short Yeats has made a formal cult of Chatterji's dreamy contemplation. He expresses in the poem the mood of the dreamer who lives in a constant state of reaction against the tyranny of the substantial and the despotism of fact. In other words, he turns his back on the vulgar world of action which Mohini taught him to despise. The Druids consequently became in his pages the high-priests of the cult of dreaminess and the word 'Druid' became synonymous with 'dreamy'. Fergus Mac Róich, the bold fighter and sturdy man of action of the Táin epic, is transformed by Yeats into 'the proud and dreaming king'.² On the first island he visits, Oisín finds everybody dreaming or falling into a trance:

And now, still sad, we came to where
A beautiful young man dreamed within
A house of wattles, clay, and skin;
.....
With one long glance for girl and boy
And the pale blossom of the moon,
He fell into a Druid swoon.³

When Oisín 'wrapped in dreams rode out again'⁴ and came to the Island of the Blessed so prominent in Celtic lore; there he finds the ancient heroes scattered about dreaming:

Some wandered ever hand in hand;
Or sat in dreams on the pale strand,
Each forehead like an obscure star
Bent down above each hooked knee,
And sang, and with a dreamy gaze

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 437.
 2. Ibid., p. 36.
 3. Ibid., pp. 417-418.
 4. Ibid., p. 421.

Watched where the sun in a saffron blaze
Was slumbering half in the sea-ways...1

Even the shells dreamt in immortal silence :

Where many a trumpet-twisted shell
That in immortal silence sleeps
Dreaming of her own melting hues,
Her golds, her ambers, and her blues... 2

Though Oisín moves about and feasts and dances, these actions are so 'wrapped in dreams' that they lose all relation to reality. The scholars who have made acquaintance of old Irish literature at first hand, assure us that Irish literature is no region of twilight mist and dreaminess, but is on the contrary essentially a literature of vigorous action and full blooded life. Francis Shaw says that Yeats invites us to enter a dream-world which 'exists only in his imagination' and which 'has no external validation in the ancient Irish sagas' ³ :

... is it not a little surprising to find
'the great fountain of Gaelic legends' pouring
forth, by some strange perversion, a pure stream
of oriental theosophy? Mr Yeats's philosophy
of inertia and intellectual atrophy derives
entirely from the East or (when we think of
Madam Blavatsky) from pseudo-Eastern sources;
it is in no sense Irish or Celtic. There is
nothing in the philosophical teachings of the
Druids to support it. 4

According to F. Shaw the message The Wanderings of Oisín brings

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 421.
 2. Ibid., p. 414.
 3. F. Shaw, 'The Celtic Element in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats',
Studies, June, 1934, p. 264.
 4. Ibid., pp. 268-269.

is 'that of the 'Mahatmas' rather than that of the Fiana'.¹ ✓

Yeats' treatment of the Irish material in the 'Celtic Twilight' period can best be illustrated by his attitude to John Sherman, the novel he published in 1891. It describes two men of opposite nature: Sherman the dreamy Chatterji-type who is empty of all ambition except to marry a rich woman so that he need do nothing but dream his life away, and the Reverend William Howard, the man of society who prefers the life of action and the bustle of a big city. Before the publication of the novel, Yeats wrote to John O'Leary:

My novel or novelette draws to a close...
It is all about a curate and a young man
from the country. The difficulty is to keep
the characters from turning into Eastern
symbolic monsters of some sort...²

Immediately after the publication of the novel, he wrote to Katharine Tynan, 'When you review it you might perhaps, if you think it is so, say that Sherman is an Irish type. I have an ambition to be taken as an Irish Novelist, not as an English or cosmopolitan one choosing Ireland as a background'.³

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1. F. Shaw, 'The Celtic Element in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats', Studies, June, 1934, p. 276.
 2. Allan Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 92.
 3. Ibid., p. 187.

III

A VISION

'... A Vision is full of connections with Theosophy and is recommended as a text by present-day Theosophists.'

R. Ellmann¹

'I am persuaded that Mrs Yeats' mediumship was in some way and degree encouraged or prompted, if not supplemented, by Golden Dawn teachings.'

V. Moore²

In 1925 Yeats published A Vision -- an explanation of life founded upon the writings of Giraldus and upon certain doctrines attributed to Kusta ben Luka. In the introduction to the first draft of the book two fictitious characters, Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne, discuss Yeats' essays in Per Amica Silentia Lunae. Robartes, who has just returned from a long sojourn in the desert, is greatly interested in Yeats' essays because he believes to

1. R. Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 71.

2. Virginia Moore, The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search for Reality, p. 277.

have found in them certain ideas corresponding to the religious beliefs of an Arab tribe called the Judwalis (diagrammatists!) with which he associated for a long time during his desert years. An old and learned man of the Judwalis had shown him an ancient book, The Way of the Souls between the Sun and the Moon (Tarīqat Un-Nufus Bayn Al-Qumūr Wa'l-Shumus), containing the secret wisdom of his tribe. The book was attributed to Kusta ben Luka, an Arab philosopher and man of science at the court of Harun Al-Raschid. The bride of this philosopher, Robartes was told, talked in her sleep, and one night somnambulantlly got out of her bed and danced some emblems on the desert sand. These became later the diagrams in the book which the philosopher offered to the Caliph as an explanation of human nature. When Robartes examined these doctrines and diagrams, he found them to be similar to those of a medieval book, Speculum Angelorum et Hominorum¹, Which he chanced to come across during his travels in Europe. This Latin book was written by Giraldus Cambrensis and printed at Cracow in 1594, a good many years before the celebrated Cracow publications. Robartes came to the conclusion that both books were derived from a lost Syriac original, and that, quite by chance, Yeats had developed the same theories in his essays as those found in these two books, one

1. Yeats later changed the title of the book to Speculum Angelorum et Hominum.

of which was Eastern, the other Western. (Apparently it was Yeats' wish to convey the idea that in A Vision he was combining European and Oriental traditions.)

To give credence to this fantastic story, Yeats asked Edmund Dulac to cut a medieval looking woodcut of Giraldus Cambrensis, which would really be a portrait of Yeats, and later used this as a frontispiece for the first edition of the book. From 1917 to 1919 he laboured to put the whole of the system into the form of a dialogue between Robartes and Aherne, but dialogue proved too clumsy as the automatic writing grew in detail and complexity. The composition of the story -- conceived as a kind of frame for the real contents of A Vision -- was changed a great deal before it was published. Robartes and Aherne finally appear only in the introductory chapters but their long and complicated dialogues are drastically shortened.

The legendary trappings with which Yeats had surrounded the first edition of A Vision prevented it from being taken seriously. Twelve years were to elapse before he revealed in the introduction to the second edition of the book (1937) his wife's part:

... as my wife was unwilling that her share
should be known... I had invented an unnatural
story of an Arabian traveller...¹

Having spent so many years improving the system, he had greater

1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 19.

confidence in it and was now willing to tell at some length the story of the automatic writing. The fact, we are told, is that on October 24, 1917, shortly after his marriage, Yeats discovered that his wife was a medium through whom creatures from another world sought to communicate to him. In trance she had begun to write down automatically the rudiments of the symbolism which he described in A Vision, and this peculiar phenomenon continued for several years. She would sit down for two or three hours a day with her husband, he putting the questions and she replying to them in automatic script in a notebook.

A very profound, very exciting mystical philosophy -- which seems the fulfillment of many dreams and prophecies -- is coming in strange ways to George and myself.¹

Yeats on his part believed in the automatic script, and the poem 'The Desert Geometry or The Gift of Harun Al-Raschid', included in the first edition of the book, gives us in a romantic setting the story of the automatic writing. Yeats could not, however, decide whether the mysterious instructors were certain dead men or sub-conscious manifestations of his own and his wife's minds:

... one of the instructors said... that spirits do not tell a man what is true but create such conditions, such a crisis of fate, that the man is

1. Allan Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 643.

compelled to listen to his Daimon. And again and again they have insisted that the whole system is the creation of my wife's Daimon and of mine...1

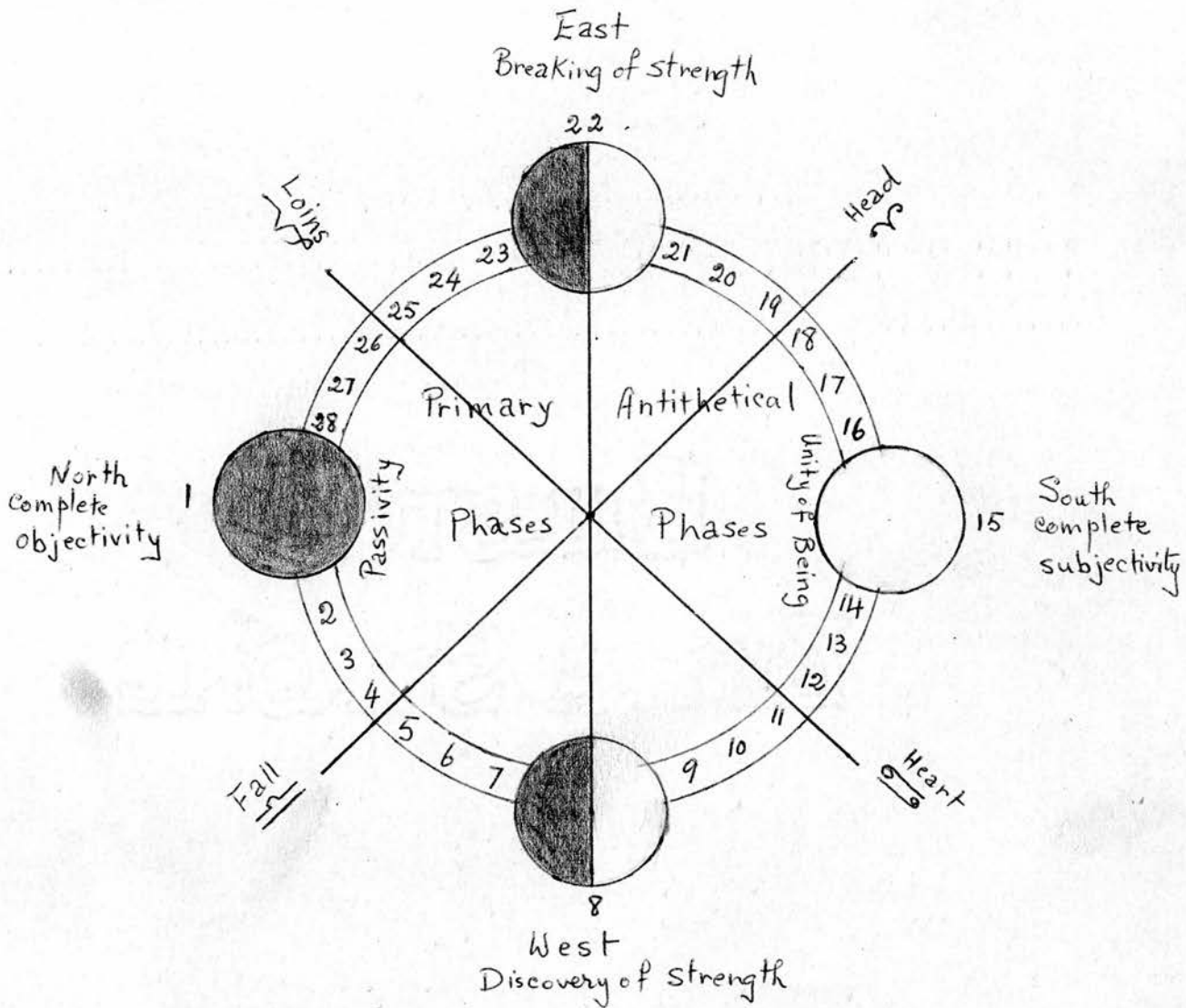
The instructors had come to present a structure of symbolic form, a pattern of archetypes; and this structure was to be communicated for poetry, not for philosophy or for science.

The symbolic system of A Vision is constructed on two main geometrical symbols, the circle or the wheel symbolising rebirth, and the double cone or gyre symbolising concord and discord. The principal characters of Yeats' cosmic antinomy are the moon and the sun :

... the soul realising its separate being in the full moon, then, as the moon seems to approach the sun and dwindle away, all but realising its absorption in God, only to whirl away once more.2

Yeats paid little attention to the Solar Wheel because it is concerned with revelation. He was interested in the earth side of the polarity or the sublunary struggle. The emphasis in the system, therefore, falls heavily upon the Lunar Wheel which he divides according to the twenty-eight phases of the moon : it has four quarters, each consists of six phases, each set being itself a wheel. Every phase of the moon is meant to represent one incarnation :

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 22.
 2. W.B. Yeats, Wheels and Butterflies, p. 139.



Twenty-and-eight the phases of the moon,
The full and the moon's dark and all the crescents,
Twenty-and-eight, and yet but six-and-twenty
The cradles that a man must needs be rocked in;
For there's no human life at the full or the dark...1

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, pp. 184-185.

The bright part of the moon's disk is subjective mind, and the dark, objective mind. Man has to pass all the twenty-eight phases, although in two of them, the first and the fifteenth no human life is possible. Full dark is full sun, or truth; full bright, full moon, or beauty.

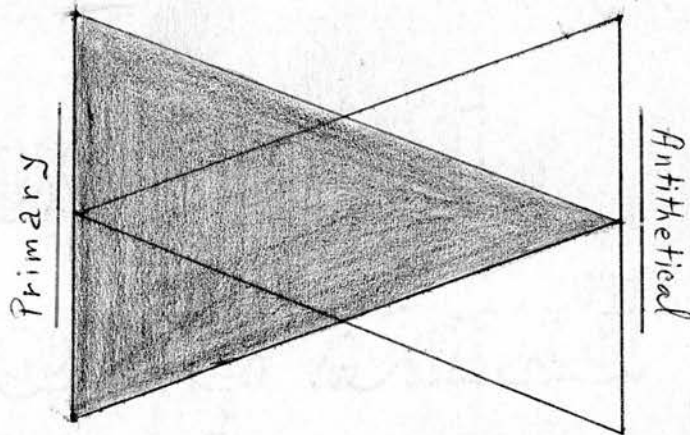
Besides the Great Wheel, Yeats has used another chief symbol: the double cone, gyre or vortex. All physical reality is a double cone; antithesis is the foundation of human nature.

A line is the symbol of time and it expresses a movement... it symbolises the emotional subjective mind... A plane cutting the line at right angles constitutes, in combination with the moving line, a space of three or more dimensions, and is the symbol of all that is objective... Line and plane are combined in a gyre, and as one tendency or the other must be always the stronger, the gyre is always expanding or contracting. Sometimes this gyre represents the individual soul... sometimes general life... understanding that neither the soul of man nor the soul of nature can be expressed without conflict... we substitute for this cone two cones...¹

These cones are continually whirling around inside one another, expanding, and narrowing, the apex of each ⁱconciding with the base of the other. According to Yeats' definition, the double cone symbolises subjectivity and objectivity as intersecting states struggling one against the other. The objective cone, also called 'primary', stands for reasonable, moral and material values; the

1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1925), p. 129.

subjective cone, also called 'antithetical', stands for imaginative, emotional and aesthetic values. The struggle between the two makes life possible, and for this struggle the double cone is an appropriate symbol.

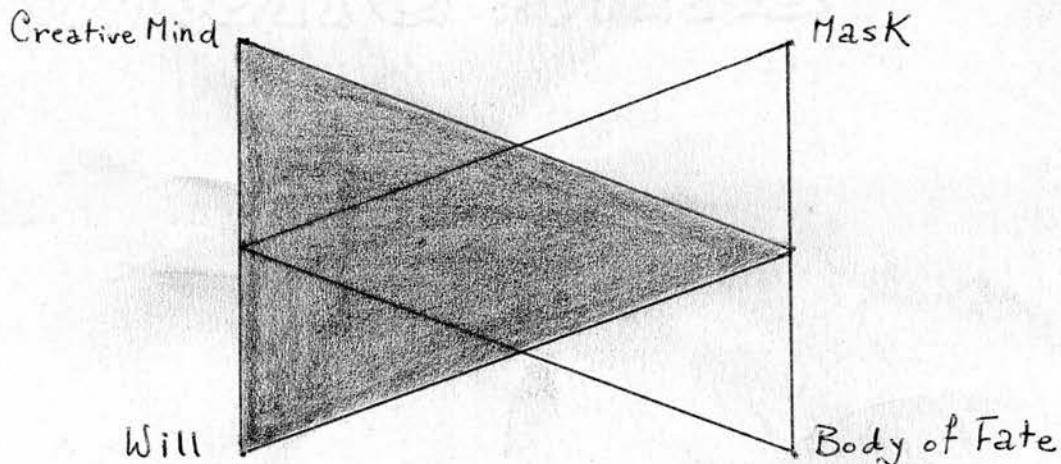


This conflict symbol in its full complexity represents all levels of human experience from the mass history of the world to the phases of individual life. Man's life is a struggle with himself as well as with his age.

I am always, in all I do, driven to a moment which is the realization of myself as unique and free, or

to a moment which is the surrender to God of all that I am. I think there are historical cycles wherein one or the other predominates. 1

The soul is not merely subjective or objective (antithetical or primary), but contains both qualities in varying proportions. Instead of being merely divided into Self and Anti-Self, as in Per Amica Silentia Lunae, it is split into 'Four Faculties', or two pairs of opposites: 'Will' and 'Mask', 'Creative Mind' and 'Body of Fate'. Yeats describes 'Will' and 'Mask' as the 'will and its object, or the Is and the Ought', and 'Creative Mind' and 'Body of Fate' as 'thought and its object, or the knower and the known'.² Bringing the 'Four Faculties' into his geometrical system of the double cone, Yeats submits man's whole existence to the law of antithesis.



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1. W.B. Yeats, Pages from a Diary Written in Nineteen Hundred and Thirty, pp. 18-19.
 2. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 73.

This illustrates the fact that man always seeks his opposite, his anti-self or daimon. The daimon is a kind of anti-self elevated, so to speak, to a plane beyond the human. His faculties are exactly opposite to those of his human counterpart.

Yeats combines the double cone and the Great Wheel and in this way he is able to combine his two aspects of life: rebirth and antithesis.

If men are born many times, as I think, that must originate in the antinomy between human and divine freedom. Man incarnating, translating 'the divine ideas' into his language of the eye, to assert his own freedom, dying into the freedom of God and then coming to birth again. 1

A man belongs to the phase where his 'Will' is, and the relations between his 'Four Faculties' change according to his place in each of the twenty-eight incarnations. The change of relations is always determined by the law of antithesis. In phase one (the dark moon), representing complete objectivity, the soul has complete passivity, and in phase fifteen (the full moon) representing complete subjectivity, there is complete beauty. In these two phases no human life is possible, there being no struggle between the cones.

In each phase of the moon, the 'Four Faculties' are given characteristic qualities, and arranged into a table. This table

1. W.B. Yeats, Pages from a Diary Written in Nineteen Hundred and Thirty, p. 20.

gives a classification of mankind. Besides this table, which is not so easy to understand, Yeats has dealt with this classification in detail, giving one or several well-known persons as typical of each lunar phase. Together with his wife he classified his friends and enemies according to the twenty-eight phases. Mrs Yeats and John Butler Yeats, for instance belonged to phase eighteen, where unity is beginning to break up though a 'wisdom of emotions' is still possible. Lady Gregory, like Queen Victoria, was in phase twenty-four where codes of conduct must dominate; and George Russell, in spite of his objections, was put in phase twenty-five, where the self accepts 'some organized belief'. Yeats gives himself a favoured position: the phase seventeen of Dante, Shelley, and Landor, where 'Unity of Being', the most satisfying condition to be attained in life becomes possible. In a further sense -- and here the system becomes more complicated -- Yeats indicates that the soul may pass through all the phases within a single lifetime.

In the section called 'The Soul in Judgement' Yeats studies the period between death and birth. As the 'Four Faculties' refer to the life of man, the so-called 'Four Principles' (Husk, Passionate Body, Spirit and Celestial Body) refer to man's existence between the various incarnations. 'The Faculties are man's voluntary and acquired powers and their objects; the Principles are the innate

ground of the Faculties.¹ In other words, the 'Principles' seem to represent the power active in the 'Faculties', and also the power that guides the periods between incarnations, the so-called discarnate states. The 'Principles', where 'pure thought is possible', are Solar, whereas the 'Faculties', being experiential, are Lunar. He has further developed his symbolic system, combining the movements of the 'Four Faculties' with those of the 'Four Principles'. In these interacting movements he sees the origin of the relation between the world of the living and that of the dead or spirits. In the discarnate period the soul wanders through six states: the Meditation, the Dreaming Back, the Phantasmagoria, the Return, the Shiftings and the Purification, so as to be prepared to accept the next incarnation.

The cones of Yeats only 'mirror reality but are in themselves pursuit and illusion'.² The Sphere, which transcends the gyres, is reality. This he calls the 'Thirteenth Cycle', which may deliver us from the twelve cycles of time and space. Within this Cycle live all the souls that have been set free because in it all whirling is at an end, and unity of being is perfectly attained; men and daimons are reconciled and there are no figures opposing one another in a demonic dance.

1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 187.

2. Ibid., p. 73.

In the Section called 'The Great Year of the Ancients' Yeats explains that the form of a single life is in microcosm the form of all historical periods:

The year of twelve or thirteen months that constitutes a single life-time was thought of as a day or night in a still greater year, and that year divided in its turn into months, and so on until we reach some greatest year. One must imagine everywhere enclosed one within another, circles of Sun in Moon, Moon in Sun... Certain cycles must have begun when all the planets stood toeing a line like young athletes. 1

Each of the twelve cycles of the Great Year lasts approximately two thousand years; but, since history is seen as a series of interlaced expanding and contracting cones, there is no break in the continuity. Subjective and objective eras alternate and each is inaugurated by a new spiritual leader.

In this historical application of the gyres, Yeats sees the East and the West as a pair of opposites (primary and antithetical). Because he believes that all these symbols of opposition can be thought of as the symbol of the relations of man and woman and of the birth of children, he speaks of the marriage of Europe and Asia and of the different civilizations as the offspring of these combinations.

Finally in the 'Dove or Swan' section he illustrates the conal

1. Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, The Holy Mountain, London, 1934, Yeats' intro. pp. 38-39.

process with names and events. The cyclic revolution of history between 2000 B.C. to the present day is studied in detail. Christ as the inaugurator of 'Christendom' was the avatar of only one 'Month' of the Great Year and his kingdom would only last two millennia. Christ ushered in a primary revelation at the climax of an antithetical civilization and will be followed by his opposite. According to the intricately dated double cone of this section, a new age in which personality will be exalted, is imminent. The argument is supported by many astrological explanations.

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Yeats was very disappointed at the poor reception of his first edition of A Vision:

The splash is very far off and very faint. Not a review except one by A.E. -- either the publishers have sold the review copies or the editors have-- and no response of any kind....1

That is obviously the reason for his intensified effort in the second edition of the book to get as many respectable moderns as possible solidly behind him. In the rewritten 'Great Wheel' section he cites Empedocles, Heraclitus, Simplicius, Plato, Aquinas, Macrobius,

1. Allan Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 712.

Flaubert and Swedenborg on the war of opposites within a sphere, and tries to prove that he is enough of a scholar to use primary instead of secondary sources. He also revised the section on 'The Great Year of the Ancients' quoting in support of his argument the Laws of Manu and the Upanishads. His long study of philosophy and his frequent recourse to the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics enabled him to discuss with great erudition the return of the planets, after twenty-six thousand years, to their original positions.

It is hard to accept Yeats' claim that A Vision was the direct revelation of the spirits imparted through his wife's automatic writing. The spirits, for one thing, have shown themselves remarkably versed in his own earlier writings, and in the books which he and his wife had read. Besides, the husband and wife, as we are told, always discussed the communications and their conscious minds no doubt had considerable effect upon the direction of the cryptic messages. It should also be remembered that before her marriage Mrs Yeats was interested in occult studies. In 1914 she joined a group of Rudolf Steiner Theosophists, and that same year Yeats suggested that she become a member of the Golden Dawn. He sponsored her and saw her through her initiation.¹ She knew his work thoroughly, especially the most recent, such as Per Amica Silentia Lunae (1917),

1. R. Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 222.

a long essay which discusses the mask, the anti-self, and their supernatural counterpart, the daimon. Being aware that the main elements of the system were foreshadowed in this essay, Yeats wrote in the introduction of A Vision:

The unknown writer took his theme first from my just published Per Amica Silentia Lunae. I had made a distinction between the perfection that is from a man's combat with himself and that which is from a combat with circumstances, and upon this simple distinction he built up an elaborate classification... Browning's Paracelsus did not obtain the secret until he had written his spiritual history at the bidding of his Byzantine teacher... before initiation Wilhelm Meister read his own history written by another, and I compare my Per Amica to those histories. 1

Reading A Vision we are conscious of many echoes of Yeats' previous work and interests. The mixture has a different taste but the ingredients have been used before. N. Jeffares points out that Yeats had been occupied with the subject-matter of A Vision before Mrs Yeats' automatic writing occurred.² Before he was married he had written to his father that his thought was part of a religious system,

more or less logically worked out. A system which will, I hope, interest you as a form of poetry. I find the setting of it all in order has helped my verse, has given me a new framework and new patterns.³

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), pp. 8-9.
 2. N. Jeffares, W.B. Yeats : Man and Poet, p. 193.
 3. J. Hone, W.B. Yeats, 1865-1939, p. 305.

As early as 1910 Yeats declared that all things have conflicting central form:

I think that all noble things are the result of warfare; great nations and classes, of warfare in the visible world, great poetry and philosophy of invisible warfare, the division of mind within itself, a victory, the sacrifice of a man to himself.¹

The astrology of A Vision also reaches back to the early stages of his youth. As a member of the Golden Dawn and Stella Matutina he had to study astrology to be initiated in the lower degree of the order.² The fact that Yeats dedicated the first edition of his book to MacGregor Mathers' widow implies that the 'revelation' was partly the fruit of his experience in the Order of the Golden Dawn:

It is a constant thought of mine that what we write is often a commendation of, or expostulation with the friends of our youth, and that even if we survive all our friends we continue to prolong or to amend conversations that took place before our five-and-twentieth year. Perhaps this book [A Vision] has been written because a number of young men and women, you [Mrs MacGregor Mathers] and I among the number, met nearly forty years ago in London and in Paris to discuss mystical philosophy.³

Attempts have been made to dismantle the intricate symbolism of A Vision and to trace in isolation the origin of each component to a different source. Such attempts, ingenious as they may be, cannot explain, however, how Yeats could have composed, in the first place, these disparate elements into a coherent mass of

1. W.B. Yeats, 'The Cutting of an Agate', Essays, p. 398.

2. In 1922, three years before the publication of A Vision, Yeats was asked to found an Irish Astrological Society, but he did not accept the offer. Later on, however, he gave lectures to the Society on astrology and free will.

3. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1925), intro. p. ix.

interlocking images based upon a single archetypal pattern. The trouble arises from the fact that many critics tend to confuse Yeats' basic sources with some of the modern authorities he was tirelessly citing in support of his thesis. A Vision is essentially the product of the author's association with the Theosophical and Hermetic 'traditions', and its various features, as we shall try to show, exist as an integral part of the esoteric teachings of both groups.

The fact that A Vision is recommended as a text by present-day Theosophists is not without its significance. A Vision and The Secret Doctrine have a good deal in common as far as their message and their method are concerned. Both books are gospels of anti-materialism in an age where materialistic science reigns supreme. They both rely heavily on ancient wisdom and ancient science to explain the universe. They invoke in support of their arguments the same names and the same philosophies: Buddha, Hermes, Heraclitus, Plato, Pythagoras, Plotinus, Swedenborg, Boehme. Both authors prefer the 'subjectivity' of the East to the 'objective' tradition of Christianity as it stands to-day. They ridicule the Christian conception of the Devil as a separate actuality and see him as no worse than the opposite aspect of the Creator (Demon Est Deus Inversus). They share the same belief in the cyclic nature of man, the reincarnation of souls, the possible escape from the wheel of

time, the millennial reversal of civilization, the conflict between the spiritual and material worlds, the unknown and unknowable god. Both proclaim to the world the approaching end of our civilization and the imminence of a new dispensation and a new avatar. The occult experiences of both authors are almost identical; Blavatsky claims that she got instructions telepathically from her 'masters' and Yeats that he got his messages in automatic writing from the 'instructors'. In both cases 'communications' were accompanied by supernatural phenomena such as sweet smells and the ringing of bells.¹

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Yeats came in contact with the Indian belief in reincarnation early in life and it does not seem unlikely that he had known the Buddhistic 'Wheel of Becoming', a wheel representing rebirth. In fact all the 'traditions' to which he adhered had always used the wheel symbol. There are wheels in the Book of Dzyan, which Blavatsky calls the oldest document in the world:

They who revolve drive their chariots round
their Lord... 2

There are wheels in The Chaldean Oracles :

Rhea... receives the Father's Power into her
countless bosoms and poureth forth on everything

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1. See A Vision (1937), pp. 15-16 and Isis Unveiled, Vol I, p. 66.
 2. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol. II, p. 15.

birth that spins like a wheel. 1

There are wheels in Trismegistic literature, Plato, Ezekiel and Celtic lore, but the most compelling source of Yeats' Great Wheel was his Hermetic Order. Its rituals are full of wheels; in the rite of the Pentagram, for instance:

Temerity is not courage... Stay, therefore, ere
your limbs be broken upon the Wheel of Life and
Death, and hard it is to be freed from that
Wheel. 2

When Yeats describes in the first edition of his book the Great Wheel as danced on the desert sand by mysterious dancers who left the traces of their feet to puzzle the Caliph of Bagdad, he was following the Tao tradition of the mandāla dance which he had read about in that 'invaluable Chinese book'³, The Secret of the Golden Flower :

... I have come across cases of women who did not draw mandāla symbols but who danced them instead. In India this type is called mandāla nrithya or mandāla dance, and the dance figures express the same meaning as the drawings...The dancers can say very little about the meaning of the symbols but are fascinated by them and find them in some way or other expressive and effective with respect to the subjective psychic condition represented. 4

Yeats was also aware of the occult mysteries of the Moon a long time before they were revealed to him by the instructors.

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1. G.R.S. Mead, The Caldean Oracles, London, 1908, Vol.I, p. 50.
 2. I. Regardie, The Golden Dawn, Vol.II, p. 178.
 3. A. Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 788.
 4. Richard Wilhelm (trans.), The Secret of the Golden Flower, London, 1931, p. 97.

In an essay on Shelley's poetry written in 1900, he refers to that poet's use of the moon as a symbol of change : 'The Moon is the most changeable of symbols, and not merely because it is the symbol of change. As mistress of the waters she governs the life of instinct and the generation of things.'¹ Theosophy teaches that although 'the Sun is the giver of life to the whole planetary system; the Moon is the giver of life to our globe.'² The Moon-goddesses were connected in every mythology with child-birth, because of the lunar influence on women and conception :

The importance of the Moon and its influence on the Earth were recognized in every ancient religion... and have been remarked by many observers of psychical and physical phenomena... It is the Moon that plays the largest and most important part, as well in the foundation of the Earth itself, as in the peopling thereof with human beings. ³

Collating all ancient beliefs, Blavatsky states further that the Brahmans believe that the departed go to the moon, and that there is the abode of the Pitris, the lunar ancestors of men. The Egyptians made the Moon-God, Taht-Esmun, the first human ancestor. In chapter XLI of the Book of the Dead life is promised after death; and the renovation of life is placed under the patronage of Osiris-Lunus, because the moon was the symbol of life-renewals or reincarnations. ⁴

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'Ideas of Good and Evil', Essays, pp. 111-112.
 2. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.I, p. 386.
 3. Ibid., p. 180.
 4. Ibid., pp. 227-228.

She asserts that lunar magnetism generates life, preserves and destroys it, psychically as well as physically. The Book of Dzvan puts it briefly :

Who forms Manu (the Man) and who forms his body ?
The Life and the Lives. Sin and the Moon. 1

The Hermetic Order also taught the importance of the moon :

Everything that has to do with growth and reproduction
is resumed in the sphere of the Moon. 2

According to the Mystical Cabala, the Moon and the Earth share one etheric double, though their two physical bodies are separate, and the Moon is the senior partner; that is to say, in etheric matters the Moon is the positive pole of the battery, and the Earth the negative one.³ In Cabalistic symbolism, the generative organs are assigned to Yesod, the Sphere of the Moon. G.R.S. Mead in Thrice Greatest Hermes makes it clear that the ancient Egyptians called

... the Moon Mother of the cosmos, and think that she has a male-female nature, for she is filled by the Sun and made pregnant, and again of herself sends forth and disseminates into the air generative principles, 4

Hermes, in one of the sermons exclaims : 'Behold the Moon, forerunner of them all, the instrument of Nature, and the transmuter of its lower matter !'⁵ The same conception runs through the philosophy

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1. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.I, p. 248.
 2. Dion Fortune, The Mystical Qabalah, London, 1935, p. 16.
 3. Ibid., p. 259.
 4. G.R.S. Mead, Thrice Greatest Hermes, Vol.I, p. 321.
 5. Ibid., Vol.II, p. 180.

of Plotinus :

The body is furnished to us... by the World-Soul,
called the 'lunar gods'... 1

✓ Always seeking traditional precedent, Yeats has significantly
marked in his own edition of Hume's The Thirteen Principal Upani-
shads² the following passage :

Those who, verily, depart from this world — to the moon,
in truth, they all go. During the earlier (the bright)
half it thrives on their breathing spirits; with the
latter (the dark) half it causes them to be reproduced.
This, verily, is the door of the heavenly world — that
is, the moon...3

Later, in his introduction to the translation of Bhagwan Shri
Hansa's The Holy Mountain, Yeats himself points out that the circular
moon-sun conflict is a familiar theme in the Upanishads :

✓ Here and there in the Upanishads mention is made of the
moon's bright fortnight... and of the dark fortnight...
He that moves towards the full moon may if wise, go to
the Gods... and to Brahma's question — 'who are you ?'
he can answer 'yourself'... those who move towards the
dark moon... can go... to the Heaven of their fathers...
The Upanishad denied any escape for these... The Eastern
poet saw the Moon as the Sun's bride; now in solitude,
now offered to her Bridegroom... Am I not justified in
discovering there the conflict between subjectivity and
objectivity, between self and not self, between waking
life and dreamless sleep. 4

Yeats goes on in his introduction to state that Turiya, the waking
vision of Brahma, is identical with full moon; and Sushupti, the

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1. W.K. Guthrie, The Philosophy of Plotinus, Philadelphia, 1896, pp. 23-24.
 2. In possession of Mrs Yeats.
 3. R.E. Hume (trans.), The Thirteen Principal Upanishads, Oxford, 1921, p. 303.
 4. Bhagwan Shri Hansa, The Holy Mountain, Yeats' intro. pp. 36-38.

lesser sleeping vision, with 'dazzling darkness' or full sun :
opposite lunar positions. Sushupti is Mount Gīrnār, Turiya Mount
Meru. These in the language of A Vision are 'The Two Directions':

Phase I to phase 15 is towards Nature
Phase 15 to phase I is towards God. 1

These two directions represent 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity',
the search for the Self or the search for God, the reality within
and the reality without. Ultimately they are inseparable but here
on earth there rages a war of opposites, with man the battle ground.
Thus Yeats' Lunar Wheel has to do with experience, the earth-process,
whereas the Solar or Zodiacal Wheel has to do with revelation :

Only when we are saint or sage, and renounce
Experience itself, can we, in the imagery of
the Christian Caballa, leave the sudden lightning
and the path of the serpent and become the
bowman who aims his arrow at the centre of the
sun. 2

The basic assumption in many ancient traditions, notably the Platonic³,
that the death of the soul is nothing more than its incarnation
here on earth, led to the choice of the most natural and ever-
recurrent periodical cosmic phenomena — the Day and the Night,
or the Sun and the Moon — as the symbols of discarnate and incarnate
life respectively. As A Vision is mainly concerned with the
life of man on earth (the night of the soul) it was natural to

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 104.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', Essays, p. 504.
 3. Thomas Taylor, Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic
Mysteries, Amsterdam, (no date), pp. 7-10.

select the Moon as the symbol of this life. Yeats makes this point clear when he writes :

... each day and night constitute an incarnation and the discarnate period which follows. I am for the moment only concerned with the incarnation, symbolised by the moon at night. 1

Mrs Yeats who was in a sense the co-author of A Vision was quite aware of the importance of the moon and its influence on human life. As a student in Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophical Society she was taught that man as a microcosm imitates in his organism what takes place in the great structure of the universe :

... profound and solemn attention was given... by the students of Anthroposophy to the passage of the Moon through First Quarter, Full Moon, Last Quarter, New Moon... They saw how she describes her twenty-eight curves or turns and they understood how Man has in his spinal column these twenty-eight vertebrae which correspond to the movements and forms of the Moon... Actually and literally, in these continuations of the vertebrae they saw a reflection of the inpouring of the Moon-streams... through the special relationship that the Moon has to the Sun, we have a year of twelve months; and from the human brain twelve nerves go out to the various parts of the organism... Man, in his head organization, is a microcosm, in respect, namely of relationship between Sun and Moon. 2

Yeats' idea of dividing the Great Wheel into quarters and each quarter into seven phases was commonplace among occultists and Theosophists. Blavatsky's explanation is very significant :

The number seven, so prominent in the Bible, so sacred

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 79.
 2. Rudolf Steiner, The Mission of Christian Rosenkreutz, London, 1950, pp. 164-166.

in its seventh (Sabbath) day, came to the Jews from antiquity, deriving its origin from the four-fold number 7 contained in the 28 days of the lunar month, each septenary portion thereof being typified by one quarter of the moon. 1

Following the Theosophical conception of the Great Wheel, Yeats gives one or several famous personalities as typical of each lunar phase. These personalities typify the development of individual souls as well as that of humanity in general. The Secret Doctrine expounds this theory in a few sentences :

Those great characters who tower like giants in the history of mankind like... Buddha and Jesus... Alexander the Macedonian and Napoleon... are but reflected images of human types which had existed... for millions of years... It is in their images that men are born... Not only does this statement apply to prominent characters in history in general, but also to men of genius, to every remarkable man of the age... very often they are ordinary mortals... in the course of their cyclic developments. 2

G.R.S. Mead also speaks of those 'sacred or typical men' who are appointed 'to certain stations and to the task of keeping the wheel revolving... and so provide means of transmission for the life-currents ever circulating in the Great Wheel.'³ In a plain language that could have come from A Vision itself, Blavatsky sums up the idea of the twenty-eight typical incarnations :

Each lunar week has a distinct occult character in the lunar month; each day of the twenty-eight has its special characteristics... this represents the

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1. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.I, pp. 386-387.
 2. Ibid., Vol.III, pp. 270-271.
 3. G.R.S. Mead, Thrice Greatest Hermes, Vol.III, pp. 138-139.

sum of knowledge that men can acquire on this earth.¹

The gyre, drawn in the diagrams of A Vision as a triangle, is the second basic symbol of Yeats. He tells us that he found the gyres 'occasionally alluded to, but left unexplored, in Swedenborg's mystical writings.'²

I am not concerned with his [Swedenborg's] explanation of how these cones have evolved from the point and the sphere, nor with his arguments to prove that they govern all the movements of the planets...³

The concepts of the Swedish philosopher were mainly concerned either with the physical basis of matter, in which Yeats was not interested, or with a view of the soul's evolution different to that which he imagined. The poet, on the other hand, recalls what Madame Blavatsky told him in his youth about the early Church :

... It was 'a triangle like all true religion', I recall her saying, as she chalked out a triangle on the green baize...⁴

She must have impressed upon him the fact that geometrical figures are fundamentally used in all ancient scriptures particularly the triangle which 'had great honour shewn it by every nation'⁵:

The ternary is ... the first of the odd numbers, as the triangle is the first of the geometrical figures. This number is truly the number of mystery par excellence...⁶

The triangle, according to Blavatsky, 'symbolised both the ideal and

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1. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.I, p. 409.
 2. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 69.
 3. Ibid.
 4. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, p. 179.
 5. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.III, p. 102.
 6. Ibid., Vol.II, p. 575.

the visible universe.¹ The ternary and the triangle represent the mystery of both God and man. According to the law of correspondence, man was made a trinity — a union of soul, body and spirit. Blavatsky speaks of 'the trinity of man himself, on his way to become immortal through the solemn union of his inner triune Self.'² She taught Yeats to look upon the triangle and the circle (the two basic symbols of A Vision) as the most significant in arcane literature:

The latter [the triangle], along with the circle, are more eloquent and scientific descriptions of the order of the evolution of the Universe, spiritual and psychic, as well as physical, than volumes of descriptive Cosmogonies and revealed 'Geneses'.³

All conflict and strife between the gyres in A Vision has but one purpose : to bring the individual to self-awareness. The contraries pull at each other; there is an enforced attraction as between positive and negative electricity; they hate and love, war and fly to embrace. Blavatsky recognized, before Yeats, this conflict as the root-principle of the universe :

Spirit and Matter, when once they are on the plane of differentiation, begin each of them their evolutionary progress in contrary directions... Both are inseparable, yet ever separated. In polarity, on the physical plane, two like poles will always repel each other, while the negative and the positive are mutually attracted, so do Spirit and Matter stand to each other — the two poles of the same homogeneous substance, the root-principle of the universe.⁴

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1. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.I, p. 617.
 2. H.P. Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled, Vol.II, p. 114.
 3. Op. Cit., Vol.I, p. 612.
 4. Ibid., p. 247.

Here are the gyres of Yeats which are continually whirling in contrary directions.¹ If there is any difference between Yeats and Blavatsky, it is only a difference in terminology. Yeats prefers to follow A.P. Sinnett² in calling spirit subjective and matter objective. This explanation throws a fresh light on Yeats' definition, on the microcosmic level, of the subjective cone as 'our inner world' our 'imagination', 'that which creates', and the objective cone as 'what is external to the mind', 'outward things rather than inward thought', 'that which serves.'³ The interlaced triangles show that Matter is as necessary to Spirit as Spirit to Matter. Evil contributes to the process of growth and, thus, has a mission in the salvation of man. Again the significance of the fact that Yeats had adopted as his motto Demon Est Deus Inversus becomes apparent. By taking this name he subscribed early in life to the teaching of Blavatsky. And now he was to use this motto as the corner-stone of his own system. Blavatsky (in the chapter whose title Yeats adopted as his name) asserts that evil or matter is but a 'reaction, opposition, and contrast' to good or spirit. 'The cause of both is found as regards the Kosmos, in the necessity of contraries or contrasts, and with respect to man, in his human nature.'⁴ In human nature, evil only denotes

1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 74.

2. See A.P. Sinnett, Esoteric Buddhism, p. 74 and pp. 69-70.

3. Op.Cit., p. 73 and p. 85.

4. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.II, p. 162.

the polarity of matter and spirit, a struggle for life between the two manifested principles. This became in the language of Yeats: 'all the sins and energies of the world are but the world's flight from an infinite blinding beam.'¹ Blavatsky also ridicules the Christian idea of the Devil as a separate identity responsible for evil and working against the Creator. In almost the same terms, Yeats denounces in A Vision the idea of the Devil as a Christian invention :

✓ ... Satan always the still half-divine Serpent never the horned scarecrow of the didactic Middle Ages. 2



Denouncing Plato he writes :

✓ ... when he [Plato] separates the Eternal Ideas from Nature and shows them self-sustained he prepares the Christian desert... instead of seeking noble antagonists, imagination moved towards divine man and the ridiculous devil. 3

✓ Blavatsky's cones are operative on all planes of human life and consciousness. In fact she thinks that the meanest cell grows, in the first stages of its development, into the shape of 'a double cone or spindle'.⁴ She asserts that the Egyptians saw in the crossed triangles the union of fire and water, the Essenes saw in it the Seal of Solomon, the Jews the Shield of David, the Hindus the Sign of Vishnu.

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', Essays, p. 497.
 2. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 280.
 3. Ibid., pp. 271-273.
 4. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol. II, p. 117.

... The double triangle is the most mysterious and most suggestive of all mystic signs, for it is a double glyph, embracing spiritual and physical consciousness and life, the former triangle running upwards, and the lower downwards, both interlaced, and showing the various planes of consciousness. 1

H. Bachchan in his thesis, W.B. Yeats and Occultism, denies the fact that Yeats' and Blavatsky's systems are identical on the grounds that the poet's triangles represent a state of perpetual conflict, , whereas Blavatsky's are equilateral, , denoting a state of balance.² As a matter of fact, Blavatsky has explained that the six-pointed star only symbolises the world before the fall. She has made it abundantly clear that when the fall into the 'two-sexed sublunary state came,'³ the state of balance was destroyed and the triangles ceased to be equilateral :

The six-pointed star, composed of a white and black triangle interlaced, symbolises this noiseless respiration, in that state where, the two breaths counteracting each other, all rest in equilibrium... The whole figure stands for the spiritual universe, or the world in that state where being and non-being embrace each other. Then comes the fall... The two triangles begin to slide upon each other in opposite directions... 4

Many of the details and implications of Yeats' gyres can also be traced to Blavatsky. For instance, the sexual symbolism which he found in the interpenetrating cones can be directly compared

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1. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.III, p. 369.
 2. H.R. Bachchan, W.B. Yeats and Occultism, Unpublished PH.D thesis, Cambridge, 1954, Appendix VI.
 3. H.P. Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled, Vol.II, pp. 456-457.
 4. H.P. Blavatsky, 'Occult Axioms and their Symbols', Lucifer, March, 1889.

to the following passage in The Secret Doctrine :

... in the exoteric rendering, the lower triangle ▽
... is the symbol of Vishnu, the god of the moist
principle and water while the triangle... △
is Siva, the principle of Fire... This is the reason
why Pythagoras and the ancients made the number six
sacred to Venus, since 'the union of the two sexes,
and the spagyrisation of matter by triads are
necessary to develop the generative forces, that
prolific virtue and tendency to reproduction which
is inherent in all bodies. 1

In the Hermetic Order, the Greater and Lesser Rituals of the Hexagram deal with the double triangle. Among other things, the hexagram represents the interchange of fire and water. During the rituals and the lectures, the triads were taken apart and put together again in many different ways. The first of the four double forms studied is a double pyramid; the second, a star; the third, a 'diamond'; the fourth, an 'hour-glass',² and all of these figure prominently in Yeats' system. The spiral transmission of force taught in the Golden Dawn was taken from the Cabala. MacGregor Mathers describes the spiral at length in The Kabbalah Unveiled. In the primum mobile start up 'whirling motions' and every thousand years 'a stone' drops into the sea, and is 'whirled onward'. Two threads, a red and a black, whirl in opposite directions; all being 'twins' as seen from the white brilliance surrounding God's eye.³ In 1936 Yeats wrote to Dorothy Wellesley :

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1. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.II, pp. 591-592.
 2. I. Regardie, The Golden Dawn, Vol.III, pp. 20-31.
 3. MacGregor Mathers, The Kabbalah Unveiled, pp. 187-190.

✓ ... When I was a young man I was accustomed to a Kabalistic ceremony where there were two pillars, one symbolic of water and one of fire. The first mark is \triangle , the water mark is ∇ , these are combined to make Solomon's seal $\nabla\triangle$. 1

There was no limit to the number of authorities that Yeats found on the subject of gyres in Western and Eastern religious literature. In his search he went as far as China where he found in the Tao Tê Ching of the Zen Buddhists the doctrine of the two opposite modes of energy. Tao, the primordial spirit or 'meaning', is undivided but out of It develops Yang and Yin, light and darkness, inherent in all phenomena. The principle is expanded to all polar opposites; including the sexual. Man is activated by the interplay of two psychic structures : first, hum which belongs to the Yang principle, and secondly, p'lo which belongs to the Yin principle.² Yeats describes these two principles in Wheels and Butterflies :

I have a Chinese painting of three old sages sitting together, one with a deer at his side, one with a scroll open at the symbol of yen [sic] and yin, those two forms that whirl perpetually, creating and re-creating all things. 3

The Rudolf Steiner Theosophists also taught Mrs Yeats that the double triangle was literally important if man was to achieve self-awareness :

Within this ... company is known and taught ... a deep

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1. Dorothy Wellesley (ed.), Letters on Poetry, p. 95.
 2. Richard Wilhelm (trans.), The Secret of the Golden Flower, pp. 12-14.
 3. W.B. Yeats, Wheels and Butterflies, p. 106.

and penetrating teaching concerning Man... The symbol by which he [the Master] teaches them consists in certain geometrical forms -- two intersecting triangles... you get this symbol when you draw apart 'Solomon's Key', so that the one triangle comes down and the other is raised up... The Master then made the members ... take up a certain attitude with their bodies. They had to assume such a position that the body itself as it were inscribed this symbol... So that in actual fact the human organism itself writes into space these two intersecting triangles. 1

Man, being a cosmos in miniature, must have his cones or gyres.

Yeats calls the conflicting cones that govern the life of man in the sublunary world, the two realities : 'the terrestrial and the condition of fire'. These two realities are represented by man and daimon or self and anti-self. The repose of man is the choice of daimon and the repose of daimon is the choice of man. The 'terrestrial state' of man is the daimon's 'condition of fire'.² In the terrestrial condition 'there the heterogeneous is, and evil... but in the condition of fire is all music and all rest.'³ It becomes apparent from this description that the 'terrestrial state' and the 'condition of fire' correspond to the cosmic realities of Matter and Spirit. Yeats himself makes the connection in A Vision :

These two minds... make up man and Daimon, the Will of the man being the Mask of the Daimon, the Creative Mind of man being the Body of Fate of the Daimon and so on... 'Demon Est Deus Inversus'. 4

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1. R. Steiner, Rosicrucianism and Modern Initiation, London, 1950, pp. 158-160.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', Essays, p. 523.
 3. Ibid., p. 524.
 4. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1925), p. 27.

In other words as Spirit stands in opposition to Matter (the manifested world), the daimon (which is in a sense man's god) stands in opposition to man. However, we should remember that man and daimon as well as Matter and Spirit, are halves of the same reality and are continually striving to complete one another.

The idea of mask and anti-self has been represented in criticism simply as man's search for an ideal. This over simplification falsifies the whole conception on which A Vision is built. The anti-self is primarily man's destiny from which there is no escape. Yeats believed literally that 'behind the momentary self, which acts and lives in the world, there is that which cannot be called before any mortal judgement seat.'¹ The daimon 'brings man again and again to the place of choice... imposing his own lucidity upon events, leading his victim to whatever among works not impossible is the most difficult.'² Hence the idea that each daimon is drawn to whatever man, or nation it most differs from. But in the last analysis,

... man or nation can no more make this Mask or Image than the seed can be made by the soil into which it is cast. 3

Yeats sees all human beings engaged in a great struggle to become united to their image of themselves. This image or mask

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'Ideas of Good and Evil', Essays, p. 125.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, p. 152.
 3. Ibid., p. 274.

is not so much an ideal dream of man, as a dream that is constantly introduced into our imagination by the daimon which Yeats describes¹ as our 'ultimate self' :

I know that the revelation is from the self,
but from that age-long memoried self, that shapes
the elaborate shell of the mollusc and the child
in the womb... and that genius is a crisis that
joins that buried self for certain moments to our
trivial daily mind... There are, indeed, personifying
spirits... through their dramatic power they bring
our souls to crisis, to Mask and Image... They have
but one purpose, to bring their chosen man to the
greatest obstacle he may confront without despair. 2

The idea that life maintains a balance, that opposites attract each other and are complementary was not the invention of Yeats, nor did it originate, in the first place, from a division in his personality. For example, George Russell's pseudonym, A.E., is derived from Aeon, a word which came to him in a vision as the name of his heavenly counterpart, to whose state he aspired. Like Yeats, he believed that 'our human faculties are burnished by their struggle with opposites in ourselves.'³ William Sharp took his pseudonym so seriously that he assumed the personality of 'Fiona Macleod' and wrote under her name books in a style different from his own, and complained to friends who wrote to her that they never wrote to him. When Tagore made the acquaintance of Yeats in 1912,

1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 83.

2. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, p. 272.

3. George Russell (A.E.), The Living Torch, pp. 177-178.

he had already conceived the idea of Jivan Devata, a sort of presiding deity or daimon or genius directing his individual life and compelling him to do the things he considered most difficult.¹ Yeats himself held correspondence for some time with his impermanent daimon, Al-Hassan Ibn-Mohammed Al-Wezaz Al-Fazi, better known as Leo Africanus. Africanus, a Moorish author of the 16th century, proposed that Yeats should write letters to him about his difficulties, and then answer them himself as if he was Leo Africanus living among the Sudanese; Africanus would be 'over-shadowing' Yeats as he wrote.

There is no doubt that Yeats was familiar with the doctrine of mask and daimon since his early youth. In the section entitled 'Four Years : 1887-1891', Yeats records in The Trembling of the Veil that at the age of 24 the idea of anti-self haunted him.² If we bear in mind that those four years also represent the period of his membership in The Theosophical Society, we cannot go far wrong in tracing the origin of this doctrine. Although mention is made of daimons in most of Blavatsky's books, a full exposition of the relationship between man and daimon was left to A.P. Sinnett. In The Growth of the Soul, a book that acted very strongly upon the imagination of Yeats and many of his friends, Sinnett asserts that only part of the soul reincarnates at birth. The non-materialistic

1. R. Tagore, The Religion of Man, London, 1931, pp. 96-97.

2. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil' , Autobiographies, p. 152.

part of the soul which is left behind is our higher self or daimon :

We -- the souls within us -- are not, as it were, altogether contained in the material envelope we actuate during life... The process of incarnation is not fully described when we speak of an alternate existence on the physical and spiritual planes... incarnation takes place on this physical plane of Nature by reason of an efflux emanating from the soul. The spiritual realm would all the while be the proper habitat of the soul... and that non-materialisable portion of the soul which abides permanently on the spiritual plane may fitly be spoken of as the Higher Self. 1

This higher self is almost dormant and unconscious during the activity of the incarnate being. Only during sleep (the partial death of the body) can there be a partial revival of this dormant self. Yeats, like George Russell,² adopted this doctrine :

... daimon ... is only found during moments of retrocession or sleep. 3

Sinnett declares that the extent to which consciousness of the daimon is revived, differs for different people. The higher self, according to him, is not merely an imperishable, spiritual monad, but the growing spiritual individuality of the man, in each given case. The growth of the spiritual individuality is, in fact, the purpose of human life, and thus the higher self may in one case be backward in its development, in another very greatly progressed. It is only in the case of persons psychically and spiritually advanced

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1. A.P. Sinnett, The Growth of the Soul, London, 1905, p. 95.
 2. See George Russell, The Candle of Vision, pp. 77-88.
 3. W.B. Yeats, Pages from a Diary Written in Nineteen-Hundred and Thirty, p. 49.

that the higher self consciousness is remembered. These people, Sinnett explains, may lead, as it were, a double life, fully conscious of and remembering in daily life the spiritual life of their deep sleep or trances :

... a person with some psychic faculties... may perceive the Higher Self... but have the impression, in their waking remembrance, that they have been conversing with some being external to themselves. They do not realise, so to speak, that they are beholding the other end of the curve through Nature, which constitutes in its eternity their own complete individuality. 1

' Ego Dominus Tuus ' , a poem published in The Wild Swans at Coole (1919), is envisaged as a conversation between 'Hic' and 'Ille' and is strongly reminiscent of Sinnett's description :

Ille. I call to the mysterious one who yet
Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream
And look most like me, being indeed my double... 2

But Yeats goes on to say in the same poem that his 'double' will

Ille. ... prove of all imaginable things
The most unlike, being my anti-self... 3

The explanation of this puzzling conception of the other self can be found again in Sinnett's book. He affirms that the higher self manifests 'thoughts of a kind that had not passed into incarnation' before and that is why 'there seems to be a complete interchange of ideas between itself and its incarnate phase' 4, as though

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1. A.P. Sinnett, The Growth of the Soul, p. 100.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 182.
 3. Ibid.
 4. A.P. Sinnett, The Growth of the Soul, p. 100.

two very different persons were concerned. 'Ille' in 'Ego Dominus Tuus' makes the point clearer still when he says :

Ille. I call to my own opposite, summon all
That I have handled least, least looked upon. 1

Sinnett states that except as regards its kind and affinities, it would be a mistake to consider the mental activities of the higher self as very greatly superior to that of the lower. The crude, guardian angel² theory of the higher self, as well as that which looks too far ahead as seeks to identify the higher individual with the Universal Self, both err in leading us to think too well of the higher self as a rule. The higher self absorbing the experiences of each lifetime in turn, undergoes a process of growth all through the long ages of its existence :

It is clearly by means of the experiences gathered by its successive manifestations... on the physical plane, that each higher self grows and advances to loftier perfection. 3

Yeats' conception of the daimon closely follows that of Sinnett.

In A Vision we are told that the daimon contains within it, co-existing in its eternal moment, all the events of our life and all that we have known of other lives⁴:

... the series of events forced upon a man from without, is shaped out of the Daimon's memory

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 180.
 2. Yeats refers to the term 'guardian angel' as the equivalent of 'daimon' in popular belief. See A Vision (1937), p. 240.
 3. A.P. Sinnett, The Growth of the Soul, p. 106.
 4. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 192.

of the events of his past incarnations; his Mask or object of desire or idea of the good, out of its memory of the moments of exaltation in his past lives... 1

Yeats, as we mentioned earlier, came across the doctrine several times when he read Blavatsky. She writes in The Secret Doctrine, for example :

The Daimones are... the guardian spirits of the human race; those who dwell in the neighbourhood of the immortals, and thence watch over human affairs... they furnish man with his fourth and fifth Principles... 2

G.R.S. Mead, a fellow Theosophist of Yeats, explains in Thrice Greatest Hermes the function of the daimon according to the Hermetic tradition :

The Daimon is the watcher over the 'way of life'; he is not necessarily a Kakodaimon, but so to speak the Karmic Agent of the soul, appointed to carry out the 'choice' of that soul, both good and ill, according to the Law of Necessity. The choice is man's; Nature adjusts the balance. 3

The Cabalists taught that the spiritual experience of Malkuth is the vision of the holy guardian angel :

... this angel which... is assigned to each soul at birth and companions him at death... is in actuality the Higher Self of each one of us... it endures for an evolution, sending down a process into matter at each incarnation to form the basis of the new personality. 4

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 83.
 2. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.I, p. 288.
 3. G.R.S. Mead, Thrice Greatest Hermes, Vol.I, p. 448.
 4. Dion Fortune, The Mystical Cabalah, p. 291.

Explaining the principal formulae of the Golden Dawn, Israel Regardie asserts that the teachings concealed in the preliminary Neophyte Grade and in that of Adeptus Minor (both of which Yeats passed at an early stage of his initiation) constitute what he calls the 'Great Work' — 'the disclosure of the essence of the mind, the invocation of the higher Genius'¹. When Yeats in his early thirties decided to have a 'Castle of the Heroes' in the middle of Lough Key (the doctrines of this new Irish cult were to be modelled on those of Theosophy and the Golden Dawn), he considered that the main purpose of the rituals would be the development of the links between the supernal and terrestrial natures of man, that is to say the bringing of the higher self to man's consciousness.

Plotinus' Enneads, as Yeats himself points out, were another source of the poet's conception of the daimon. He praises the Egyptian philosopher for establishing 'as sole source the timeless individuality or daimon instead of the Platonic Idea'.² The daimons, according to Plotinus, stand midway between earth and moon and between gods and man.

In our present state — part of our being weighed down by the body, as one might have the feet under water with all the rest untouched — we bear ourselves aloft by that intact part and, in that, hold through our own centre to the centre of all centres. ³

1. Israel Regardie, The Golden Dawn, Vol.I, p. 49.

2. W.B. Yeats, Wheels and Butterflies, p. 37.

3. Stephen Mackenna (trans.), Plotinus, London, 1917-1930, Vol.I, p. 248.

In our present state, he believes, we are not cast out; 'but upon that Primal-Man which we were' before our incarnation, 'another man has been intruded and we are become a double person... and our first and loftier nature lies torpid.' ¹

Yeats found confirmation of this doctrine in many ancient traditions. He came across the idea of 'mask' in the Gnostic 'Hymn of the Soul' :

I took down ... Burkitt's Early Eastern Christianity and opened it at random. I had opened it at a Gnostic Hymn that told of a certain king's son who, being exiled, slept in Egypt — a symbol of physical life — and how an Angel while he slept brought him a royal mantle... I found a footnote saying that the word mantle did not represent the meaning, for that which the Angel gave had the exile's own form and likeness. ²

Again he found at the centre of the mandālas in The Secret of the Golden Flower, a figure of high religious significance. The centre of the mandāla represents a higher centre of the personality than the one to which the 'I' is usually applied and the figure in it is variously called the higher ego, the higher self, or the king.

Mrs Yeats was no less conversant with the conception of an opposite being operating in the depths of our subconscious life. The Rudolf Steiner Theosophists to whom she belonged called the

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1. Stephen Mackenna (trans.), Plotinus, Vol.I, p. 152.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, p. 379.

daimon the 'Spirit Man' and defined it as an opposite of what we are in life. They maintained that 'a man often yearns for what, in his conscious life, he hates'¹ :

How would it be if I were to take those things which I have not desired, which are disagreeable to me and imagine that I myself actually willed them ?... If we proceed in this way, a very definite impression will ultimately be made upon the soul; we shall feel as though something were striving to be released from us. The soul says to itself : 'Here, as a mental image, I have before me a second being; he is actually there'. We cannot get rid of this image, and the being gradually becomes our 'Double'. The soul begins to feel a real connection with this being who has been imagined into existence, to realise that this being actually exists within us. 2

Does not the poet say, 'If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are, and try to assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves' ? ³ Does he not assure us that he takes 'pleasure alone in those verses where it seems to me I have found some... Image which is the opposite of all that I am in my daily life' ? ⁴

As the world below is constructed on the model of the world above, so the relation between man and woman is the symbol of the relation between man and his anti-self or daimon :

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1. Rudolf Steiner, The Mission of Christian Rosenkreutz, p. 75.
 2. Ibid., pp. 23-24.
 3. W.B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', Essays, p. 497.
 4. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, p. 274.

This relation (the Daimon being of the opposite sex to that of man) may create a passion like that of sexual love. The relation of man and woman, in so far as it is passionate, reproduces the relation of man and Daimon... 1

In Per Amica Silentia Lunae we are told that sexual love is an image of the warfare of man and daimon.

✓ According to the Cabala and Brahmanical literature, the first races were a-sexual; then came hermaphrodite races. When the fall of humanity came, the division into two sexes took place. At present when souls descend to this world, they separate into twin souls, one male, the other female, which must meet one another and unite. It is only while sexual relations are taking place that man is a complete being. MacGregor Mathers explains that 'the whole conception of things' is 'divided into male and female and in their association is found perfection'²:

✓ All souls are pre-existent in the world of emanations, and are in their original state androgynous, but when they descend upon the earth they become separated into male and female... if therefore in this mortal life the male half encounters the female half, a strong attachment springs up between them, and hence it is said that in marriage the separated halves are again co-joined; and the hidden forms of the soul are akin to the Kerubim. 3

That is why Yeats writes in A Vision :

The marriage bed is the symbol of the solved antinomy,

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1925), p. 27.
 2. S.L. MacGregor Mathers, The Kabbalah Unveiled, pp. 281-282.
 3. Ibid., pp. 34-35.

and were more than symbol could a man there
lose and keep his identity... 1

The spiritual significance of sexual intercourse is common even
in the most ascetic schools of India. Yeats himself records this
fact in support of his argument :

... all the bonds resemble each other...
in India the novice tortured by his passion
will pray to the God to come to him as a
woman and have with him sexual intercourse;
nor is the symbol subjective, for in the
morning his pillow will be saturated with temple
incense... Such experience is said however,
to wear itself out swiftly giving place to
the supernatural union. 2

The period between death and rebirth is elaborately described
in Book III of A Vision. The main features are a reliving by the
spirit over and over again, of the passionate moments that have
most moved it in life. They occur in the order of their intensity
or luminosity, the more intense first. This is followed by the
'Return' in which the spirit must live through past events in the
order of their occurrence because it has to explore the moral and
intellectual implications of every thought until all are related
and understood. When the spirit has thus exhausted all passionate
events and all thought-forms, it has liberated itself and the
past life is dismissed. It is now no longer one of 'the dead'

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1925), p. 52.
 2. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), pp. 239-240.

but is a free spirit, and in future stages of purgation it is purified of both good and evil. The last stages of purgation is the 'for^eknowledge', a vision of the next incarnation, which the spirit must accept before it is reborn.

As a detailed analysis of the various states of the soul after death would be of relatively little importance to the study of Yeats' poetry, it may be sufficient to indicate that his doctrines roughly correspond to those he came across in Theosophy and the Enneads of Plotinus. For example, the following quotation from A Textbook of Theosophy would clearly demonstrate the origin of Yeats' conception of life after death.

Having put off his physical body, the ego continues to live in his astral body until the force has become exhausted which has been generated by such emotions and passions as he has allowed himself to feel during earth-life. When that has happened... the astral body also falls away from him, and he finds himself living in the mental body... In that condition he remains until the thought-forces generated during his physical life have worn themselves out...¹

The interaction between the 'Faculties' and the 'Principles' corresponds closely to Plotinus' doctrines. Yeats himself refers to Plotinus' ideology when he discusses them :

... I identify the Celestial Body with the First

1. C.W. Leadbeater, A Textbook of Theosophy, Madras, 1954, p. 80.

Authentic Existant of Plotinus, Spirit with his Second Authentic Existant, which hold the First in its moveless circle; the discarnate Daimons, or Ghostly Selves, with his third Authentic Existant or soul of the world... Plotinus has a fourth condition which is the Third Authentic Existant reflected first as sensation and its object (our Husk and Passionate Body), then as discursive reason (almost our Faculties). 1

Plotinus' system envisaged a hierarchy of values emanating from an Absolute 'beyond existence'. On the rungs of that ladder Man descended, and must reascend. Yeats refers to Plotinus' third Ennead when he comes to explain the progress of the soul in the 'Shiftings', the third stage after death. In this state of equilibrium there is neither motion nor sensation; there is complete impassivity of the dis-embodied soul. In the words of Plotinus,

Purification ... is simply to allow it [the disembodied soul] to be alone; it is pure when it keeps no company... when it entertains no alien thoughts... Separation, in the same way, is the condition of a soul no longer entering into the body to lie at its mercy; it is to stand as a light. 2

In Per Amica Silentia Lunae and the first edition of A Vision there is hardly any suggestion of escape from the Wheel of Becoming. In the second edition of A Vision, however, Yeats stresses the freedom conferred by the Thirteenth Cycle or Sphere, because there

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), pp. 193-194.
 2. S. Mackenna (trans.), Plotinus, Vol.II, p. 74.

nothing coerces, neither sense, instinct, environment nor custom. In this Cycle all whirling is at an end, and unity of being can be perfectly attained. Daimons and men are reconciled, contraries are united and the antinomies resolved. This ultimate reality because neither one nor many, concord nor discord, is symbolised as a phaseless sphere. Commenting on the significance of the sphere as a symbol of eternity, Blavatsky writes :

... the sphere has been with all nations the emblem of eternity and infinity... It is the symbolical circle of the Kabalists, 'whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere.' 1

The Hermetic Order also taught its Adepts Majori (6=5) to project the Tree of Life 'as if in a solid sphere'² in which the North Pole coincides with Kether and the South Pole with Malkuth.

The Thirteenth Cycle, according to Yeats, is also in every man and it can deliver us from the twelve cycles of time and space :

... the thirteenth sphere or cycle... is in every man and called by every man his freedom. Doubtless, for it can do all things and knows all things, it knows what it will do with its own freedom but it has kept the secret. 3

Because this Cycle is of necessity unintelligible to all bound to the antinomies, Yeats has followed the tradition of 'popular

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1. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.I, p. 65.
 2. I. Regardie, The Golden Dawn, Vol.IV, pp. 231-242.
 3. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 302.

mysticism' and called it 'the pictures in the astral light'.¹

This is plainly the Anima Mundi of Blavatsky and the Hermetists. ✓

To Blavatsky the astral light is the reservoir of all that touched mankind :

... the Astral Light, 'the great picture-gallery of eternity', is a faithful record of every act, and even thought, of man, of all that was, is or ever will be... 2

She describes the astral light as the Soul of the World, the sidereal light of the Theurgists and the Kabalists. She asserts that we can evoke pictures from the workshop of nature with the help of symbols. In fact, Yeats was trained early in life by MacGregor Mathers in the art of using symbols to evoke images from the astral light.³

In some unpublished notes, Yeats frankly compares his Thirteenth Cycle with the Nirvana of the Buddhists : ✓

... if consciousness is indeed conflict must not the phaseless sphere from which all comes and to which all returns... be unconscious, and annihilation, as some say the early Buddhists thought, end all our effort? I have come to see however, that their conflict resolves itself into the antinomies of Kant and that we must say of the ultimate reality as the early Buddhists themselves said, 'We do not know that it exists, we do not know that it does not exist... 4

In A Vision Yeats admits that 'passages written by Japanese monks

1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 193.

2. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.I, p. 104.

3. See chapter I.

4. R. Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, pp. 234-235.

on attaining Nirvana, and one by an Indian¹ run in his head whenever he contemplates the sphere where all contraries are united. He also came to see in the little lump in the centre of Purohit Swami's forehead a significant symbol of his sphere :

... that round mark the third eye, no physical organ but the mind's direct apprehension of the truth, above all antinomies, as the mark itself is above eyes, ears, nostrils, in their duality — 'Splendour of the Divine Being... ' 2

Yeats attempts a historical application of his gyres in the sections entitled 'The Great Year of the Ancients' and 'Dove or Swan'. A Great Wheel of twenty-eight incarnations is considered to take some two thousand odd years, and twelve such wheels constitute a single great cone or year of some twenty-six thousand years. The Lunar 'Months' of 2200 years apiece represent civilization, while the Solar 'Months' of a similar length correspond to periods of religion. Each Solar Month may be called a revolution of Creative Mind and Body of Fate beginning and ending with Creative Mind in Aries, each Lunar Month a revolution of Will and Mask beginning and ending with Will at phase one. In other words Yeats held that civilizations being polaric, they alternate between primary and antithetical, as do religious dispensations which are their contemporaries and opposites. The alternation is represented by

1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 214.

2. Shri Purohit Swami, An Indian Monk, Yeats' intro. p. xxvi.

Oedipus and Christ. They represent two incompatible ideas, one is 'Triumph', the other 'Sacrifice', one is the 'Sage', the other is the 'Victim'.¹ Oedipus is man painfully becoming a god but Christ is God descending into man. Oedipus is concrete man descending into earth at the moment of his final triumph, Christ is abstract spirit rising after His Crucifixion into abstract Heaven:

What if Christ and Oedipus or, to shift the names, Saint Catherine of Genoa and Michael Angelo, are the two scales of a balance, the two butt-ends of a seesaw? What if every thousand and odd years something happens in the world to make one sacred the other secular; one wise, the other foolish; one fair, the other foul; one divine the other devilish? What if there is an arithmetic or geometry that can exactly measure the slope of a balance, the dip of a scale, and so date the coming of that something? 2

Our present dispensation refers to an external and abstract unity that has little to do with man. The next dispensation will establish itself by immediate experience, making little of God or any exterior unity. Human personality will be exalted again and man will make a 'cardinal truth of the soul's re-embodiment'. Man 'will no longer separate the idea of God from that of human genius, human productivity.'³

To George Russell, instructed like Yeats in Theosophy, the

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 243.
 2. Ibid., pp. 28-29.
 3. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1925), pp. 214-215.

idea of a new cycle being at hand, was quite plausible. Besides, he was also of the opinion that 'humanity throughout history oscillates like a pendulum betwixt opposites'.¹ In June 1896, twenty-nine years before the publication of A Vision, Russell wrote to Yeats :

✓ There is a hurrying of forces and swift things going out and I believe profoundly that a new Avatar is about to appear and in all spheres the forerunners go before him to prepare. It will be one of the kingly avatars, who is at once ruler of men and magic sage. 2

Yeats, on his side, wrote to Russell from London that he was convinced that a new cycle was about to begin. There is no doubt that in 1896 the teachings of Blavatsky were still very fresh in their minds :

In about nine years hence, the first cycle of the first five millenniums, that began with the great cycle of the Kali-Yuga, will end... We have not long to wait, and many of us will witness the Dawn of the New Cycle. 3

Yeats wrote again to Russell to tell him that they were both of the new cycle rather than of the cycle that was ending. Russell enthusiastically concurred : 'I agree with you that we belong to the coming cycle. The sun passes from Pisces into Aquarius in a few years. Pisces is phallic in its influence. The waterman

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1. George Russell, Imaginations and Reveries, Dublin, 1915, pp. 90-91.
 2. R. Ellmann, Yeats : Man and Masks, pp. 123-124.
 3. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.I, intro., p. xliv

is spiritual so the inward turning souls will catch the first rays of the new Aeon.'¹ This correspondence shows very plainly that the idea of the cyclic revolution of history and that of the Great Year with all its astrological trappings were not the invention of Yeats. Blavatsky speaks of the 'cyclic periods accomplished and recommenced within the Great Saros.'² In The Secret Doctrine she writes :

... Magnus Annus, or the great year — a cycle composed of the revolutions of the sun, moon, and the planets, and terminating when these return together to the sign whence they were supposed at some remote epoch to set out. ³

Yeats has studied the old Aryan belief in 'Brightening and Darkening Fortnights' in connection with the Great Year :

I do not remember the brightening and darkening fortnights in any classical author, but they are in the Upanishads and in the Laws of Manu for the Great Year and its Months pervaded the ancient world. ⁴

He also knew the Indian conception of Kalpas, for in Wheels and Butterflies he traces the origin of the Great Year to the East and points out that when the Manvantra was 'animated by the

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1. R. Ellmann, Yeats : Man and Masks, p. 124.
 2. H.P. Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled, Vol.I, p. 34.
 3. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.II, p. 784.
 4. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 246.

Indian jungle it generated new thoughts and multiplied itself into Kalpas.¹

Mrs Yeats was not completely innocent of all previous knowledge of the cyclic revolutions and the Great Year. Rudolf Steiner had taught her that,

Each of these epochs provides its own special conditions for the development of certain human powers and faculties, and each endures for a period of about 2,160 years -- the time taken by the sun, in the procession of the equinox, to move from the centre point of one sign of the zodiac to the centre point of the next. 2

Steiner, moreover, had reconsidered previous periods of civilization and culture in the light of the cyclic theory in much the same way as Yeats.

It is safe to conclude that Yeats knew all the essentials of his system a good number of years before their 'revelation'. Considering the fact that the originators of the 'messages' shared so much of his previous experiences, it would be correct to say that they only came to organise all that he had sought and learnt in his Theosophical and Hermetic days. Yeats admits that his

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1. W.B. Yeats, Wheels and Butterflies, pp. 105-106.
 2. George Francis, New Knowledge for the New Age : An English Review of the Teachings of Rudolf Steiner, London, 1942, p. 130.

latter-day philosophy was largely a process of exploiting 'with
the excitement of new discovery, things known in my youth'.¹

1. W.B. Yeats, Letters to the New Island, intro., p. vii.

IV

THE SWORDSMAN REPUDIATES THE SAINT

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work,
And if it take the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion...

W.B. Yeats¹

'Fair and foul are near of kin ,
And fair needs foul', I cried.

W.B. Yeats²

Although he firmly believed that the artist would eventually come to share in the fortunes of the mystic, Yeats realized that in the course of their struggle to achieve perfection, they must keep different company. The world of art is a world of forms; and forms belong to the finite and not to the infinite; to life and not to eternity. The artist seeks beauty which belongs to the world of time and space, and not to infinity and eternity where form and name are lost. Yeats gives the clearest expression

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 278.

2. Ibid., p. 294.

of the difference between the mystic and the artist in 'Vacillation':

The Soul. Seek out reality, leave things that seem.
The Heart. What, be a singer born and lack a theme ?
The Soul. Isaiah's coal, what more can man desire ?
The Heart. Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire ! 1

✓ In 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul', the Soul calls the poet to the mystical ascent and offers to deliver him from rebirth and to bring him to heaven :

My Soul. Think of ancestral night that can,
If but imagination scorn the earth
And intellect its wandering
To this and that and t'other thing,
Deliver from the crime of death and birth. 2

✓ But the Self welcomes the returning wheel with all its toil and pain. It realises that it has a blessedness of its own and refuses to leave the material for the transcendental.

✓ The mystic, in Yeats' view, shoots his arrow straight to the centre of the wheel leaving all perceptual and ideational cognition behind, but the poet must 'perme in a gyre' and endure birth after birth till all whirling is reduced to a point. In one of his essays, he writes :

There is an old saying that God is a circle whose centre is everywhere. If this is true the saint goes to the centre, the poet and artist to the ring where everything comes round again. The poet

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 285.
 2. Ibid., p. 265.

must not seek for what is still and fixed,
for that has no life for him... Is it that
all things are made by the struggle of the
individual and the world of the unchanging
and the returning, and the Saint and the poet
are over all, and that the poet has made his
home in the serpent's mouth ? 1

Commenting to Mrs Shakespeare on his Collected Poems, which he was preparing for publication, Yeats wrote, 'The swordsman throughout repudiates the saint, but not without vacillation. Is that perhaps the sole theme -- Usheen and Patrick -- 'So get you gone Von Hugel though with blessings on your head ? ' 2 This description is not surprising from a man who has classified himself under the seventeenth phase of the moon. The Mask of this phase, it should be remembered, is one of physical control and balance while its Body of Fate is that of the saint from phase twenty-seven. That is to say while Yeats' Mask is that of the poet, his natural self has more to do with the saint :

I saw suddenly in the mind's eye an old man
erect, and a little gaunt, standing in the
door of the tower, while about him broke a
windy light. He was the poet who had at last,
because he had done so much for the world's
sake, come to share in the dignity of the
Saint... And though he had but sought it for
the world's sake... it had come at last into
his body and mind. 3

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'The Cutting of an Agate', Essays, p. 356.
 2. A. Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 798.
 3. Op. Cit., p. 360.

Although Yeats' poetry is rooted in the sublunary world of conflict and struggle it never loses sight of the world of unity above antinomy and strife. He discerns in the conflict of the phenomenal world a sanctity which belongs to a hidden spiritual purpose constantly working to restore man to his unity with the ultimate reality. He even believed that 'natural and spiritual things do not differ in kind'.¹ He asserts that dependence upon the realm of spirit alone is evasion and half-truth, just as it is a half-truth for the man of the world to scorn the spirit and serve the world only in action. In his 'Introduction to ~~the~~ Māndookya Upanishad', the poet writes :

To seek God too soon is not less sinful
than to seek God too late. We must love
man, woman, or child, we must exhaust
ambition, intellect, desire, dedicating
all things as they pass or we come to God
with empty hands. 2

He believed that this world was constructed on the pattern of the one above and that the duty of the artist is to use the affinities and kinships in this world to symbolise the next and to evoke the higher truths. In order to do this the poet should identify himself with the Soul of the World (Anima Mundi) and free himself from all that is impermanent in that Soul. The end of art is

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1. W.B. Yeats and E. Ellis (eds.), The Works of William Blake, Vol.I, p. 236.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'Introduction to Māndookya Upanishad', Criterion, July, 1935, p. 554.

'the ecstasy awakened by the presence before an ever-changing mind of what is permanent in the world.'¹ The development of the poet is the steady discarding of the inessential and the concentration and expansion of those symbols which he thinks could ultimately be related to Anima Mundi that strange company of spirits that take shape in human minds. Yeats believes that the poet may throw his poetic symbol into the pool and the sound of the stone dropping into the deeps will awaken a like experience in every mind, and we will have come a little nearer the truth both about the visible surface and the hidden depths. The choice and the value of a symbol are, ultimately, mystical in character. When a man 'writes any work of genius', says Yeats, 'is it not because some knowledge or power has come into his mind from behind his mind ?'²

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions...³

It is through symbols that Yeats thinks, because the symbol is the only thing free enough from all bonds to speak of perfection. It is the means by which reality which is no more than guessed at

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'The Cutting of an Agate', Essays, p. 355.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil', Autobiographies, p. 272.
 3. W.B. Yeats, 'Ideas of Good and Evil', Essays, pp. 192-193.

can be indicated.

A Vision represents the culmination of the poet's attempts to find a system of related symbols and archetypal patterns that could help him to fathom the depths and to bring him nearer to the higher truths. The fact that he could believe in that system, whatever its real value may be, is responsible for the positive strength of the poems he wrote in his middle and late periods. It is also responsible, to a certain extent, for his frequent repetition of ideas and images at varying intervals of time, sometimes in slightly altered guise. He once said to his wife that he had spent the whole of his life saying the same thing in different ways.¹ Some of the poems of the middle period are dependent on the esoteric phraseology of A Vision and need the fuller explanation given in that book. Others, however, succeed in retaining their terms of reference within themselves and transcend their technical intricacies.

The dialogue poem 'The Phases of the Moon' which dramatises the return of Robartes from Arabia, summarises the central part of Yeats' lunar parable. Robartes and Aherne walk past the tower of Thoor Ballylee where Yeats reads late into the night. They

1. G.P. Allt, 'Yeats and the Revision of his Early Verse',
Hermathena, November, 1944, p. 92.

take diabolic pleasure when they see the lamp in the tower window,
for it signifies that the poet still vainly seeks the great secret
that they now own. Aherne finally asks Robartes to sing the changes
of the moon :

Robartes. From the first crescent to the half, the dream
But summons to adventure and the man
Is always happy like a bird or a beast;
But while the moon is rounding towards the full
He follows whatever whim's most difficult
Among whims not impossible...
... twice born, twice buried, grow he must,
Before the full moon, helpless as a worm. 1

After the crumbling of the moon, the soul which has so far been
seeking itself begins to seek the world. Taking upon itself the
'coarseness of the drudge', it would serve the world as 'reformer,
merchant, statesman, learned man, / dutiful husband, honest wife
by turn.'² And finally the famous last three incarnations :

Robartes. Hunchback and Saint and Fool are the last
 crescents.
The burning bow that once could shoot an arrow
Out of the up and down, the wagon-wheel
Of beauty's cruelty and wisdom's chatter --
Out of that raving tide -- is drawn betwixt
Deformity of body and of mind. 3

The Saint and the Hunchback are the subject of another poem
which can hardly be understood without the fuller explanation

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 185.

2. Ibid., p. 187.

3. Ibid., p. 188.

given in A Vision. The Hunchback is the 'Multiple Man' of phase twenty-six. He is 'the most completely solitary of all possible men.' His deformity is symbolised by the hump 'that thwarts what seems to be the ambition of a Caesar or of an Achilles.' If the man of this phase seeks, not life, but knowledge of each separated life in relation to supersensual unity, he will, 'because he can see lives and actions in relation to one another, see their deformities and incapacities with extraordinary acuteness.'¹ Speaking of his previous incarnations, the Hunchback says to the Saint :

Hunchback. Stand up and lift your hand and bless
A man that finds great bitterness
In thinking of his lost renown.
A Roman Caesar is held down
Under this hump. 2

The Saint, on the other hand, who belongs to phase twenty-seven answers in a language no less esoteric :

Saint. I shall not cease to bless because
I lay about me with the taws
That night and morning I may thrash
Greek Alexander from my flesh,
Augustus Caesar, and after these
That great rogue Alcibiades. 3

The four quarters of the Lunar Wheel which apply to the ages of history as well as to the life of the individual, are described in 'The Four Ages of Man'

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), pp. 177-179.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 189.
 3. Ibid., p. 190.

He with body waged a fight,
But body won; it walks upright.

Then he struggled with the Heart;
Innocence and peace depart.

Then he struggled with the Mind;
His proud Heart he left behind.

Now his wars on God begin;
At stroke of midnight God shall win. 1

✓ According to A Vision the phases one to eight are associated with elemental earth, being phases of germination and sprouting, those between phase eight and phase fifteen with elemental water, because there the image-making power is at its height; those between phase fifteen and phase twenty-two with elemental air, because through air or space, things are divided from one another, and here intellect is at its height; those between phase twenty-two and phase one with elemental fire, because here all things are made simple. In a letter to Olivia Shakespeare, Yeats gives a clue to his symbols :

The Earth = Every early nature-dominated civilization.

The Water = An armed sexual age, chivalry, Froissart's Chronicles.

The Air = From the Renaissance to the end of 19th century.

The Fire = The purging away of our civilization by our hatred. 2

The idea that the Divine appears at the stroke of midnight in this

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 332.

2. A. Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 825.

poem as well as in 'Byzantium' is Cabalistic :

Although the hours which precede midnight are also
part of the night, the Holy One, blessed be his
name, does not descend until midnight into the
Garden of Eden ... 1

In the Neo-Platonic tradition, midnight was considered the hour
peculiarly accommodated to the darkness and oblivion of a corporeal
nature; and to these circumstances the nocturnal celebration of
the mysteries doubtless alluded.

The soul, as we have seen in the last chapter, passes through
all the phases within a single lifetime, beginning with the completely
unindividualised or objective state of infancy, rising to the full
individuality or subjective humanity, and sinking back (going
round back) to complete objectivity of the dark moon (or dazzling
sun). In 'Lines written in Dejection' the poet at the age of
fifty laments the subsiding fire of his passion and the approach
of the objective phases of his life where he must at last 'wither
into truth' :

When have I last looked on
The round green eyes and the long wavering bodies
Of the dark leopards of the moon ?
All the wild witches, those most noble ladies,
For all their broom-sticks and their tears,
Their angry tears, are gone.
The holy centaurs of the hills are vanished;

1. As translated from the Zohar by D. Saurat in Literature
and Occult Tradition, London, 1930, p. 114.

I have nothing but the embittered sun;
Banished heroic mother moon and vanished... 1

Yeats obviously thought of 'the wild witches' and 'the holy centaurs' as emblems of the moon. The 'embittered sun' has, however, raised a lot of speculation among critics. Blavatsky's description of the symbolic significance of the sun and its hostility to all human passions may shed some light on Yeats' epithet. In a chapter entitled 'The Trial of the Sun Initiate', she writes :

This Self, the highest, the one, and the universal,
was symbolised on the plane of mortals by the Sun,
its life-giving effulgence being in its turn the
emblem of the soul -- killing the terrestrial
passions which have ever been an impediment to
the reunion of the Unit Self with the All Self. 2

The sun, therefore, has been 'embittered' by the prolonged struggle with the poet's (lunar) passions which have been a hindrance to its control.

Although 'The Cat and the Moon', written in 1917, is closely connected with the moon parable, it can be understood without direct reference to A Vision .

... the nearest kin of the moon,
The creeping cat, looked up...
Does Minnaloushe know that his pupils
Will pass from change to change,
And that from round to crescent,
From crescent to round they range ? 3

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, pp. 163-164.
 2. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.III, p. 271.
 3. Op. Cit., pp. 188-189.

The poet tells us in Wheels and Butterflies that he allowed himself when he wrote this poem to think of the cat as the normal man.¹ The possible sources of the cat-moon relationship have aroused some controversy. Grover Smith suggests² Demetrius' On Style as a possible source, but Carl Benson argues³ that the ultimate source, for Yeats, is The Secret Doctrine. Madame Blavatsky explains in her book that the cat, a lunar symbol, was sacred to Isis, herself the Moon in one sense. The eye of the cat seems to follow the lunar phases in its growth and decline. In a chapter entitled 'Symbolism and Ideographs' she adds :

The Egyptians portrayed the moon as a Cat... They had observed the simple fact that the cat saw in the dark, and that her eyes became full-orbed, and grew most luminous by night... and so the familiar cat was adopted as a representative, a natural sign, a living pictograph of the lunar orb. 4

It is reasonable to believe that Yeats had read these specific passages, but it is almost certain that Thrice Greatest Hermes was his most compelling source.

... on the arch of the sistrum, at the top, they [the Egyptians] put the metal figure of a cat with a human face... and by the cat symbolised the moon on account of variable nature, night habits, and fecundity of the beast. For it is fabled to bring forth... eight-and-twenty, the number of lights of the moon... And by the

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1. W.B. Yeats, Wheels and Butterflies, p. 138.
 2. Grover Smith, 'Yeats, Minnaloushe and the Moon' Western Review, Summer, 1947, p. 244.
 3. Carl Benson, 'Yeats' 'The Cat and the Moon' ', Modern Language Notes, April, 1953, p. 221.
 4. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.I, p. 304.

human face of the cat is signified the intellectual
and reasonable nature of the changes that take
place in connection with the moon. 1

Yeats also makes the connection between the moon and child-birth
in 'The Crazy Moon' :

Crazy through much child-bearing
The moon is staggering in the sky... 2

All conflict and struggle in the universe is envisaged in
Yeats' poetry as a dance ritual. The rhythm of man's life is regulated
to the dance of the heavens, of sun and moon. The dance represents
the paradoxical order of life — an ordered conflict. In Rosa
Alchemica, Yeats writes, 'Michael Robartes told me that before
my initiation could be perfected I had to join three times in a
magical dance, for rhythm was the wheel of Eternity, on which
alone the transient and accidental could be broken, and the spirit
set free.' Having entered the great hall, a mysterious wave of
passion swept him into the dance and he heard a voice crying,
'Into the dance ! there is none that can be spared out of the
dance. '3 In 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', the idea occurs
again :

All men are dancers and their tread
Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong. 4

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1. G.R.S. Mead (ed.), Thrice-Greatest Hermes, Vol.I, pp. 344-345.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 273.
 3. W.B. Yeats, 'Rosa Alchemica', The Collected Works,
Vol.VII, pp. 130-134.
 4. Op. Cit., p. 234.

In 'Under the Round Tower', the poet expresses the sun-moon relationship as a dance, which dramatically symbolises the order of conflict. In the poem the dream of the beggar, Billy Byrne, relates dance and conflict imagery to images of sexuality :

He stretched his bones and fell in a dream
Of sun and moon that a good hour
Bellowed and pranced in the round tower;

Of golden king and silver lady,
Bellowing up and bellowing round,
Till toes mastered a sweet measure

.
That golden king and that wild lady
Sang till stars began to fade,
Hands gripped in hands, toes close together,
Hair spread on the wind they made...1

In the light of Yeats' reference to the poem in A Vision², we understand that the golden king and the silver lady (the sun and the moon) symbolise the continual oscillation which represents the horizontal movement of the historical cones. All things are driven to seek the final equilibrium achieved by the dance of the sun and moon in Billy Byrne's dream. The rest of the poem shows that this beggar, typical of humanity, is a victim of internal conflict, which creates in the fallen world a tension of opposites.

In 'The Double Vision of Michael Robartes' the dancer symbolises

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 154.
 2. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 270.

a visionary experience, a strange balance between opposites caught momentarily in the mind's eye. The vision comes to Robartes on the Rock of Cashel, the ancient capital of Munster where he sees a girl dancing between a Sphinx and a Buddha.

On the grey rock of Cashel I suddenly saw
A Sphinx with woman breast and lion paw,
A Buddha, hand at rest,
Hand lifted up that blest;

And right between these two a girl at play
That, it may be, had danced her life away... 1

The Sphinx and the Buddha are supposed to represent two opposite poles : the utmost development of man's inner self and his final achievement of a divine unity without outside interference, on one hand, and the complete obliteration of the self in favour of an outside deity, on the other. In the language of A Vision one is 'introspective knowledge of the mind's self-begotten unity, an intellectual excitement' and the other is 'the outward-looking mind, love and its lure'.² In simple words it is his old distinction between the 'subjective' mind and the 'objective' mind. Yeats' choice of Sphinx and Buddha as symbols for these two traditions has proved troublesome because, according to his theory both should, more or less, represent the same thing : self-begotten unity.

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, pp. 192-193.
 2. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 207.

Yeats admits that

In certain lines written years ago in the first excitement of discovery I compared one to the Sphinx and one to Buddha. I should have put Christ instead of Buddha, for according to my instructors Buddha was a Jupiter-Saturn influence... 1

The dancer, on the other hand, is drawing the 'antithetical' and the 'primary' into a single configuration. She stands for a mid-point which participates in the qualities of both; she reconciles body and mind, dreaming and thinking, she is both dead and full of life :

O little did they care who danced between,
And little she by whom her dance was seen
So she had outdanced thought.
Body perfection brought,
For what but eye and ear silence the mind
With the minute particulars of mankind ?
Mind moved yet seemed to stop
As 'twere a spinning-top. 2

The dancer spins down into herself, achieving the perfect combination of motion and stillness. The image of the 'top' is visual, the top spinning so rapidly that it seems actually not to spin at all -- the opposites joined in equilibrium. In the third part of the poem Robartes recovers from the vision and makes a moan because he is himself trapped in the world of antinomies. He is, nevertheless,

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), pp. 207-208.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 193.

thankful for having been permitted to transcend time if only for a moment.

The dancing body and the spinning mind create a single mental state, a higher unity of all things. In 'Among School Children', Yeats evokes this unity through images. The body cannot be distinguished from the soul :

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul...
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole ?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance ? 1

Yeats' conception of the Tree of Life as a symbol of absolute unity is largely influenced by a Yoga precept which Blavatsky repeats throughout her books :

If thou wouldest believe in the Power which acts within the root of a plant, or imagine the root concealed under the soil, thou hast to think of its stalk or trunk and of its leaves and flowers. Thou canst not imagine that Power independently of these objects. Life can be known only by the Tree of Life... (Precept for Yoga). The idea of Absolute Unity would be broken entirely in our conception had we not something concrete before our eyes to contain that Unity... The roots, the trunk and its many branches are three distinct objects, yet they are one tree. 2

In 'The Two Trees', written earlier, Yeats' conception of the Tree of Life is distinctly Cabalistic :

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, pp. 244-245.
 2. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol. I, p. 58.

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,
The holy tree is growing there;
From joy the holy branches start...
The surety of its hidden root
Has planted quiet in the night... 1

The second part of the poem shows that it is only the shadow and counterfeit of this Tree, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which is mirrored on the human plane. The Cabala, in fact, depicts the Sephirotic tree as having two aspects, one benign, the reverse side malign. On one side are the Sephiroth, on the other the dread Qlippoth.

... there a fatal image grows
That the stormy night receives,
Roots half hidden under snows,
Broken boughs and blackened leaves.
For all things turn to barrenness
In the dim glass the demons hold,
The glass of outer weariness... 2

The poet refers to the Tree of Life again in the second verse of 'Vacillation' where it is described as a symbol of the antinomies :

A tree there is that from its topmost bough
Is half all glittering flame and half all green...
And half is half and yet is all the scene;
And half and half consume what they renew... 3

The 'fire' and 'water' of the Sephirotic Tree are here the 'flame'

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 54.
 2. Ibid., p. 55.
 3. Ibid., pp. 282-283.

and the 'green'. The 'Pillar of Mildness' that co-ordinates the two elements and achieves equilibrium is represented in the poem by the image of Attis :

And he that Attis' image hangs between
That staring fury and the blind lush leaf
May know not what he knows, but knows not grief. 1

To hang the image of Attis between the two sides of the tree does not mean, as R. Ellmann suggests,² that one should give up all hope for normal life experience and try to become one with that god.

The image of Attis is meant to suggest the 'Central Pillar' which The Mystical Qabalah describes as the point of reconciliation between the microcosm and the macrocosm :

... It is not only the centre of the Sacrificed God, but also the centre of the Inebriating God, the Giver of Illumination. Dionysos is assigned to this centre as well as Osiris, for ... the Central Pillar is concerned with modes of consciousness; and human consciousness, rising from Yesod [the Sphere of the Moon] by the Path of the Arrow, receives illumination in Tiphareth; therefore all the givers of illumination in the Pantheons are assigned to Tiphareth. 3

Ellmann's explanation would conflict with the main theme of the poem which is set in the first two lines : 'Between extremities / Man runs his course'.

Although Yeats does not mention the Tree of Life in 'The Poet

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 283.
 2. R. Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, p. 273.
 3. Dion Fortune, The Mystical Qabalah, pp. 193-194.

Pleads with the Elemental Powers', he admits in a note on the imagery of the poem that he associates the 'Seven Lights' which move about the pole of the heavens with that Tree.¹ What is more interesting about this poem, perhaps, is the poet's use of the elemental spirits of Madame Blavatsky.

The Powers whose name and shape no living creature
knows
Have pulled the Immortal Rose;
And though the Seven Lights bowed in their dance and
wept,
The Polar Dragon slept...
Great Powers of falling wave and wind and windy fire,
Encircle her I love and sing her into peace...²

As W.Y. Tindall has pointed out, 'the 'Powers' of this poem are Madame Blavatsky's elemental spirits, the 'Immortal Rose' is the Rosicrucian flower, and the 'Seven Lights' are the seven planets and the astral light of theosophy.'³ Yeats has learnt from the Theosophists that an occultist can employ the 'elementals' to produce various effects :

The Elementals are creatures evolved in the four kingdoms or elements -- earth, air, fire and water... they are the forces of Nature... These forces, as the servile agents of the occultist, may produce various effects. 4

Yeats is, therefore, invoking these powers to charm Maud Gonne and to 'sing her into peace. ' He refers to these powers in

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1. P. Allt and R. Alspach (eds.), The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, notes p. 812.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 80.
 3. W.Y. Tindall, 'The Symbolism of W.B. Yeats ', Accent, Summer, 1945, pp. 210-211.
 4. H.P. Blavatsky, The Key to Theosophy, Point Loma, California, 1907, p. 318.

'To Ireland in the Coming Times' :

... the elemental creatures go
About my table to and fro,
That hurry from unmeasured mind
To rant and rage in flood and wind... 1

The Tower of Thoor Ballylee and its winding stair became one of the most prominent symbols of Yeats' mature poetry. The meaning of the symbol varied a little from poem to poem, but on the whole it was, as he said in 'The Phases of the Moon', an image of 'mysterious wisdom won by toil'. Other facets of the symbol acquire emphasis in the poem called 'The Tower', where it is representative of a heroic and unconquerable tradition and the creative spirit of man. In 'Blood and the Moon' the poet declares :

... this tower is my symbol; I declare
This winding, gyring, spiring treadmill of a stair is
my ancestral stair... 2

He learnt from Celtic literature, as well as from Blavatsky, that ' the 'Round Towers' of Ireland were sacred places of initiation.' ³ T.R. Henn thinks that the poet was also aware that the tower was the central point of The Shepherd of Hermas.⁴ On the other hand, the winding stair which suggests the tortuous path of life, is equivalent to the gyres of A Vision. The stairs which lead up

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 57.
 2. Ibid., p. 268.
 3. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.III, p. 288.
 4. T.R. Henn, The Lonely Tower, fn., p. 124.

to the top of the tower were also an emblem of the spiritual ascent which he conceived as the antinomy of spirit and matter or of heaven and earth :

Before that ruin came, for centuries,
Rough men-at-arms, cross-gartered to the knees
Or shod in iron, climbed the narrow stairs,
And certain men-at-arms there were
Whose images, in the Great Memory stored,
Come with loud cry and panting breast
To break upon a sleeper's rest... 1

The Tower is bound to the cycle of history, and its values of action and war are seen against the decadence and confusion of the present :

Odour of blood on the ancestral stair !
And we that have shed none must gather there
And clamour in drunken frenzy for the moon. 2

Among his bird symbolism, the swan occupies a very important place. The image of the swan is common enough in poetry but in Yeats its mystic significance arises from its use to symbolise sometimes the human soul and its occult qualities and sometimes Godhead and its cyclic manifestations. In a note on Calvary the poet writes :

Certain birds, especially as I see things, such
lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle and swan,
are the natural symbols of subjectivity, especially
when floating upon the wind alone or alighting upon

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 221.
 2. Ibid., p. 269.

some pool or river... 1

The swan alighting on a lake is a poetic image of the triangles of 'fire' and 'water'. Blavatsky who has given a lot of attention to this symbol, writes, 'Swans are the emblems of water and fire, before the separation of the Elements.'² In 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' the poet writes :

Some moralist or mythological poet
Compares the solitary soul to a swan...
The wings half spread for flight,
The breast thrust out in pride
Whether to play, or to ride
Those winds that clamour of approaching night. 3

There is little doubt that Yeats' attention was first drawn to this symbol by Blavatsky in the 'eighties. The swan occupies a very important place in Hindu mythology and was therefore discussed at great length in her books. As a traditional Hindu symbol for divinity it represents 'Divine Wisdom, Wisdom in darkness beyond the reach of man' ⁴:

... the swan — a symbol of the Supreme Brahm and one of the avatars of the amorous Jupiter — was also a symbolical type of cycles... in human history... It was probably suggested by the swan loving to swim in circles... the last death song of the cyclic swan has commenced; only a few are they who heed it... Those who do, however, find the cyclic song sad, very sad... 5

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1. W.B. Yeats, Four Plays for Dancers, London, 1921, notes p. 137.
 2. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol. I, pp. 357-358.
 3. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, pp. 234-235.
 4. Op. Cit., p. 79.
 5. H.P. Blavatsky, 'The Last Song of the Swan', Lucifer, February, 1890, pp. 446-450.

In 'The Tower' the swan singing his last song is the symbol of a civilization that is passing away :

When all streams are dry...
When the swan must fix his eye
Upon a fading gleam,
Float out upon a long
Last reach of glittering stream
And there sing his last song. 1

The symbolic structure of Yeats' theory of history as represented by the movement of gyres also begins with the story of Leda and the Swan. According to ancient legend, Leda was the wife of Tyndareus, by whom she became the mother of Timandra and Philonae. One night she was embraced both by her husband and by Zeus. By the former she was the mother of Castor and Clytemnestra and by the latter Helen and Pollux. A popular variation supposes that Zeus visited Leda disguised as a Swan and she produced two eggs, from one of which issued Helen and from the other Castor and Pollux.

Madame Blavatsky elaborated the mythological significance of the story of Leda and worked out the correspondence between the Greek and Hindu conceptions of the mundane egg in order to prove the fundamental similarity of all ancient cosmologies. In fact, the story of Leda and the Swan acquired a special significance

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 223.

in Theosophical writings. M. Mertens-Stienon, a well known Theosophist, has given a detailed analysis of the legend in her book, Studies in Symbolism Based on H.P. Blavatsky's Secret Doctrine.¹ Apart from the theogonical and astronomical interpretation, here is part of what Blavatsky had to say about the symbolic meaning of the story :

... a dual meaning ... is found in the several variants of the allegory of Leda and her two sons Castor and Pollux... They are semi-immortal; they live and die, each in turn... It [the myth] relates to that group of cosmic allegories in which the world is described as born from an egg... Castor and Pollux... became the highly significant symbol of the dual man, the Mortal and the Immortal... they are also the symbol of the ... transformation from the animal man into a god-man with only an animal body. 2

Yeats wrote his first version of 'Leda and the Swan' in 1924, choosing 'Annunciation' as its title, but discarding it in the final draft.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs ?...
A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop ? 3

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1. M. Mertens-Stienon, Studies in Symbolism Based on H.P. Blavatsky's Secret Doctrine, London, 1933, pp. 33-81.
 2. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.II, pp. 121-123.
 3. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 241.

In the years which just preceded and followed the writing of this poem, the poet was busy writing his essay on history, the section of A Vision entitled 'Dove or Swan'. According to this essay the annunciation that founded Greece was based on an initial act that joined humanity and God. In the language of Blavatsky, the offspring of Leda started the transformation of animal man into a god-man. Apart from this general meaning, Yeats' poem also implies that the eternal Zeus requires the temporal Leda, that God and Nature (Spirit and Matter) require each other. In 'Lullaby', written in 1929, the poet makes it clear that when Zeus came to Leda and gave himself to her he was in need of her loving protection :

Such a sleep and sound as fell
Upon Eurotas' grassy bank
When the holy bird, that there
Accomplished his predestined will,
From the limbs of Leda sank
But not from her protecting care. 1

In the civilization that followed this annunciation, there was no need for people to look beyond themselves towards a transcendent power, since they shared the divinity of God by harbouring Godhead in their own souls. This was the sort of dispensation that Yeats liked to call 'antithetical' -- obeying immanent power.

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 301.

There is an obvious distinction between 'The Mother of God' and 'Leda and the Swan'. Although the 'wings beating about the room'¹ appear again in 'The Mother of God', they are only the wings of the angel of traditional Christianity, a messenger from a power that remains outside this world of antinomies. The Son of God is a self-created divinity that has no need for man. Though born in time He remains outside time for His birth is a miracle that cannot be repeated. Mary regrets the task thrust upon her and would have preferred to live like every common woman. To her Christ is not a son but

The Heavens in my womb.
Had I not found content among the shows
Every common woman knows,
Chimney corner, garden walk,
Or rocky cistern where we tread the clothes
And gather all the talk ?
What is this flesh I purchased with my pains...
This love that makes my heart's blood stop
Or strikes a sudden chill into my bones ... ? 2

In a poem called 'A Stick of Incense' Yeats suggests the abstract nature of the Christian Annunciation :

Whence did all that fury come ?
From empty tomb or Virgin womb ? 3

Christ has inaugurated a 'primary' era in which 'God is now conceived of as something outside man and man's handiwork' with the result

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 281.
 2. Ibid., pp. 281-282.
 3. Ibid., p. 383.

that 'things are testified to from books that are outside human genius, being miraculous, and by a miraculous Church.'¹ For Yeats there was a further distinction between the Greek and the Christian stories. The poet saw Zeus as the greatest lover and his visit to Leda as a supreme act of love. Christ, on the other hand, was born into the world out of pity (not love) for man :

In pity for man's darkening thought
He walked that room and issued thence
In Galilean turbulence...²

On the astronomical level the Greek or 'antithetical' civilization began under a Saturn-Jupiter conjunction, but the Christian or 'primary' dispensation was born under a Venus-Mars conjunction. In a letter to Mrs Shakespeare the poet writes, ' I was told... that my two children would be Mars conjunctive Venus, Saturn conjunctive Jupiter respectively; and so they were... Then I was told that they would develop so that I could study in them the alternating dispensations, the Christian or objective, the Antithetical or subjective. Michael is always thinking about life. Anne always thinks of death.'³

If Jupiter and Saturn meet,
What a crop of mummy wheat !

The sword's a cross; thereon He died:
On breast of Mars the goddess sighed. 4

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), pp. 273-274.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 240
 3. A. Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, pp. 827-828.
 4. Op. Cit., p. 333.

It is interesting to note that Yeats follows Blavatsky in using 'Wheat' as a symbol of the revolution of cycles. She points out that wheat was a sacred cereal with the Egyptian priests and was often placed with their mummies¹:

Truly the soil of the long by-gone past is not
dead, for it has only rested. The skeletons of
the sacred oaks of the ancient Druids may still
send shoots from their long dried-up boughs and
be reborn to a new life, like the handful of corn,
in the sarcophagus of a mummy 4,000 years old which,
when planted, sprouted, grew, and gave a fine
harvest. 2

In 'On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac', the poet clearly associates the 'old mummy wheat' with the return of past cycles:

... yet I, being driven half insane
Because of some green wing, gathered old mummy wheat
..... but now
I bring full-flavoured wine out of a barrel found
Where Seven Ephesian toppers slept and never knew
When Alexander's empire passed, they slept so sound.
Stretch out your limbs and sleep a long Saturnian sleep... 3

According to A Vision the appearance of the cyclical god is usually preceded by intellectual preparations. At the time of Plato and Aristotle, the pendulum of history was already beginning to swing towards the idea of an objective deity. 'To Aristotle

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1. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol. II, pp. 373-374.
 2. Ibid., Vol. III, pp. 23-24.
 3. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 242.

and to Christian orthodoxy', writes Yeats, 'only God has value in Himself, even Spirit is contingent. At the fall of Hellenism and its exaltation of personality, instinct demanded an extreme objectivity. Man had to annihilate himself.'¹ The development of Greek philosophy concided with the fall of Hellenism and thus even Plato repelled Yeats because of the element of objectivity in his thought. Plato 'thinks all things into Unity and is the 'First Christian'.²

I mock Plotinus' thought
And cry in Plato's teeth... 3

In our own age, the Christian era is coming to an end and the preparation for the new dispensation has already started. The new philosophy is now being impressed upon the minority. The approaching cycle will inevitably call up an opposite movement or rather resume past eras in itself. Michael Robartes, who has found the lost egg of Leda, intends to return to the desert to bury it in the sand and leave it to be hatched by the sun's heat.⁴ Yeats feels sure that the race, which will issue from this egg, will establish itself by immediate experience, making little of God or any exterior unity.

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1. Bhagwan Shree Patanjali, Aphorisms of Yoga, Yeats' intro. p. 16.
 2. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), pp. 263-264.
 3. W.B. Yeats, 'The Tower', The Collected Poems, p. 223.
 4. Op. Cit., p. 51.

I imagine new races, as it were, seeking domination,
a world resembling but for its immensity that of
the Greek tribes -- each with its own Daimon or
ancestral hero -- the brood of Leda, War and Love;
history grown symbolic, the biography changed
into a myth... 1

Christianity, as the poet indicates in 'The Second Coming',
began with the point of the cone of concord, and the gyre thus
begun has almost reached its fullest expansion :

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold... 2

The running out of the cone of concord and unity will be followed
by the change 'from circle to point', the new point being the
apex of the cone of discord which moves in the opposite direction :

... a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight : somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man...
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born ? 3

The Sphinx of the 'Second Coming' which Yeats describes as 'a brazen
winged beast'⁴, is an archetypal image of the interlinked mystery
of Nature and Man. In the ancient mysteries the Sphinx with its

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 214.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, pp. 210-211.
 3. Ibid., p. 211.
 4. W.B. Yeats, Wheels and Butterflies, p. 103.

body of a lion or bull and its human head represented the whole evolution through which man has to pass; while its eagle's wings signified the divine nature which he carries within himself. In other words, it represented the growth of divine wisdom through experience, pain and suffering under the shadow of the Tree of Good and Evil. Yeats finds in the story of Oedipus another example of this independent growth of divine wisdom. 'He knew nothing but his mind, and yet because he spoke that mind fate possessed it and kingdoms changed according to his blessing and his cursing. Delphi, that rock at earth's navel, spoke through him...'¹ In 'Colonus' Praise' Yeats writes :

And yonder in the gymnasts' garden thrives
The self-sown, self-begotten shape that gives
Athenian intellect its mastery...²

The new civilization, therefore, is to be born from all that our age has rejected. We have been living in a cycle of twenty centuries (a Month of the Great Year) in which man's body and man's Self have been denied expression. If 'The Second Coming' conveys the idea that the Sphinx of violence will devour the Lamb of the Cradle, it must be remembered that that which rocks in the cradle (i.e. outside man) and that which slouches towards Bethlehem (i.e. inside man) are one and the same :

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 28.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 245.

Love and Discord, Fire and Water, dominate in turn, love making all things One, Discord separating all, but Love no more than Discord the changeless eternity. 1

If history is torn between these two poles, there are moments, usually after a movement has traversed half the phases of its wheel, when a reconciliation between these opposites is achieved :

At Phase 11 and 12 occurs what is called the opening of tinctures, at Phase 11 the antithetical opens, at Phase 12 the primary... Unity of Being becomes possible. Hitherto we have been part of something else, but now discover everything within our own nature. 2

In 'The Tower' Yeats expressed this Unity of Being through the symbolic figures of the antinomy :

O may the moon and sunlight seem
One inextricable beam...3

The Byzantine state is the poet's classical example of a civilization in which religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, Byzantine art which inherited both the Roman magnificence, with its glorification of physical power, and the Christian faith, with its glorification of Spirit, made building, picture and metal-work seem but the single vision of a whole people. In Byzantium even the Church realized that beauty should be sanctified :

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 247.
 2. Ibid., p. 88.
 3. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 220.

A certain Byzantine Bishop had said upon seeing
A singer of Antioch, 'I looked long upon her
beauty, knowing that I would behold it upon the
day of judgement, and I wept to remember that
I had taken less care of my soul than she of her
body. 1

In 'Sailing to Byzantium', the city becomes the equivalent of
eternity, eternity seen in a specifically non-abstract form as a
static historical moment poised between the 'primary' and the
'antithetical' movements of history.

... I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
... .. and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity. 2

The history of personality, like that of nations, is basically
a struggle between the 'primary', or objective, and the 'antithetical',
or subjective. From this doctrine Yeats developed his idea of self
and anti-self; of men seeking their opposites. The creative artist
can invent a work of genius if he can imagine himself as different
from what he is, and try to assume that second self. His work
is great if it feeds the hunger in his heart :

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), pp. 285-286.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, pp. 217-218.

William Morris, a happy, busy, most irascible man, described dim colour and pensive emotion, following, beyond any man of his time, an indolent muse; while Savage Landor topped us all in calm nobility when the pen was in his hand, as in the daily violence of his passion when he had laid it down. 1

Yeats found his best example in Dante who in search of his anti-self, lecherous as he was in life, found in the purity of Beatrice an image which mirrored all the suffering of his desire :

I think he fashioned from his opposite...
He set his chisel to the hardest stone.
Being mocked by Guido for his lecherous life...
He found the unpersuadable justice, he found
The most exalted lady loved by a man. 2

Keats had been born with a thirst for luxury, and being poor, he was driven to imaginary delights :

I see a schoolboy when I think of him,
With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window...
And made — being poor, ailing and ignorant,
Shut out from all the luxury of the world,
The coarse bred son of a livery-stable keeper —
Luxuriant song. 3

The two halves of an artist's personality (his self and anti-self) are completely joined in the act of creation.

In A Vision Yeats occasionally refers to the idea that man and woman were a single being before the Fall. He often quoted to his friends a story of Hafiz, the Persian poet, about a man

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', Essays, p. 489.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 181.
 3. Ibid., p. 182.

who knocked on the door of his beloved, 'Let me in', and was told to go away; he knocked again and was again sent away; he knocked a third time and was asked 'Who are you ? ' 'I am thyself'.

'Enter'.¹ The idea turns up in his poem 'A Man Young and Old' :

We sat under an old thorn-tree
And talked away the night...
And when we talked of growing up
Knew that we'd halved a soul
And fell the one in t'other's arms
That we might make it whole... 2

The poet saw in the separation of man and woman an image of the warfare of man and daimon; only in their union in the sexual act could they recover the unity of their soul and transcend the world of antinomies :

The lot of love is chosen. I learnt that much
Struggling for an image on the track
Of the whirling Zodiac.
. If questioned on
My utmost pleasure with a man
By some new-married bride, I take
That stillness for a theme
Where his heart my heart did seem
And both adrift on the miraculous stream
Where — wrote a learned astrologer —
The Zodiac is changed into a sphere. 3

In his 'Introduction to Māndookya Upanishad' Yeats wrote that the Tantric philosophers believe that 'a man and a woman, when in sexual union, transfigure each other's images into the masculine and feminine characters of God... There are married people who though they do not

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1. A.N. Jeffares, W.B. Yeats : Man and Poet, p. 267.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 253.
 3. Ibid., p. 311.

forbid the passage of the seed practise... at the moment of union, a meditation, wherein the man seeks the divine Self as present in his wife, the wife the divine Self as present in the man.¹

In 'Solomon to Sheba' and 'Solomon and the Witch', Yeats successfully enlarges the doctrine of the twin souls to include his central myth of the sun and the moon.

All day long from mid-day
We have talked in the one place,
All day long from shadowless noon
We have gone round and round
In the narrow theme of love. 2

The relation between Solomon and Sheba corresponds to the relation between the 'mid-day' sun and the full moon. The idea of associating Solomon with the sun is derived from Blavatsky who taught that the Jewish monarch was a solar hero. She quotes a private letter written by Charles Sotheran, a Mason and an initiate of the Brotherhood of the Rosie Cross, in which he states that 'the temple at Jerusalem is called after a monarch whose name proves his mystical character, Sol-On-On, the name of the sun in three languages.' 3

'Solomon and the Witch' is a more complex poem for it operates on a cosmic as well as a microcosmic level. In their union, Solomon and the Witch (an emblem of the moon in Yeats) not only represent

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'Introduction to Māndookya Upanishad', Criterion, July, 1935, p. 555.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 155.
 3. H.P. Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled, Vol.II, p. 389.

In the dedication to A Vision (1925) Yeats stated that the book was not really finished, since he had said 'little of sexual love' and nothing about the 'Beatific Vision'. R. Ellmann remarks¹ that the juxtaposition of the two subjects was not accidental for in the joining of lovers in the sexual act he saw the window open momentarily upon the Beatific Vision. The poet, it should also be remembered, saw the 'Unity of Being', the most desired state in the hierarchy of personality, as firmly centred in the sexual life. According to him, as the phases where Unity of Being becomes possible approach, 'sexual love becomes the most important event in life, for the opposite sex is nature chosen and fated.'²

Yeats' poems which deal with sex are often looked upon as the product of lustihood. Closer examination, however, shows that their sexuality is always stylized and expressly symbolic. Besides, his interest in the subject did not start, as is sometimes assumed, in old age. The hero of his unpublished novel, written in his early youth, proposes to improve Christianity by reconciling it with natural emotions and particularly with sexual love :

He was going to the East now to Arabia and Persia,
where he would find among the common people so soon
as he had learnt their language some lost doctrine
of reconciliation; the philosophic poets had made

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1. R. Ellmann, Yeats : The Man and the Masks, p. 264.
 2. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 88.

sexual love their principal symbol of a divine love and he had seen somewhere a list of untranslated Egyptian MSS. that certain of them dealt with love as a polthugic [sic.] power. 1

Yeats saw that religion must embrace sexuality or be an empty dogmatism. The ancients recognized sex as an inseparable part of the mystery of life and their religions were, in this sense, life-furthering and not life-destroying. The poet sums up his theme in 'Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgement' :

'LOVE is all
Unsatisfied
That cannot take the whole
Body and soul... ' 2

Yeats carries the argument one step further in 'Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop.' Following the Cabalists who consider matter and spirit as interdependent or rather 'as different levels of the same thing'³ he asserts that

'Fair and foul are near of kin,
And fair needs foul,' I cried...
'A woman can be proud and stiff
When on love intent;
But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent.' 4

In the Hermetic philosophy the belief that the body (or matter

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Speckled Bird, Unpublished — see R. Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, p. 52.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, pp. 291-292.
 3. Dion Fortune, The Mystical Qabalah, p. 149.
 4. Op. Cit., pp. 294-295.

generally) is the source of evil is repudiated, for 'real wisdom consists in balance, in the Middle Way; that nothing is evil in itself -- the Body is as honourable in its own sphere, as absolutely necessary and indispensable, as is the Mind in its.' ¹

In 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer' Robartes argues that the body can exist in its own sensuous right and yet possess the properties of soul and mind :

... sinew that has been pulled tight,
Or it may be loosened in repose,
Can rule by supernatural right
Yet be but sinew. ²

In the 'Supernatural Songs' Yeats shows a marked preference for the all inclusive phallicism of early religions. The hermit Ribh in 'Ribh Denounces Patrick' (originally entitled 'Ribh Prefers an Older Theology') violently rejects the 'masculine Trinity' of Christianity because it implies an absolute difference between nature and supernature. With the Smaragdine Tablet of Hermes in mind, Ribh, whose Christianity 'comes from Egypt' ³, insists that even the gods participate in sexuality. He believes that the basic religious error in the Western world has been its acceptance of a masculine trinity when all impulses demand the man, woman and child trinity of all natural and supernatural stories. Western

1. G.R.S. Mead, Thrice-Greatest Hermes, Vol. II, p. 96.

2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 198.

3. W.B. Yeats, A Full Moon in March, London, 1935, intro., p. vi.

Christianity has affirmed the feminine principle only surreptitiously
in a virgin undefiled by the masculine Godhead :

An abstract Greek absurdity has crazed the man --
Recall that masculine Trinity. Man, woman, child (a
daughter or a son),
That's how all natural or supernatural stories run...
For things below are copies, the Great Smaragdine
Tablet said. 1

Ribh goes beyond castigation of Patrick and affirms that this
sexual coupling of all things from Godhead to fly is the basic
principle. The only difference between the natural and the supernatural
pattern 'is that we beget and bear because of the incompleteness
of our love.'² :

The mirror-scaled serpent is multiplicity,
But all that run in couples, on earth, in flood or air,
share God that is but three,
And could beget or bear themselves could they but
love as He. 3

Yeats' rejection of a masculine Trinity derives from his early
Theosophical⁴ and Hermetic studies. MacGregor Mathers complains
that

... for some reason or other best known to themselves,
the translators of the Bible have carefully crowded
out of existence and smothered up every reference
to the fact that the deity is both masculine and
feminine. They have translated a feminine plural
by a masculine singular in the case of the word
Elohim... 5

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, pp. 328-329.
 2. A. Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 824.
 3. Op. Cit., p. 329.
 4. See H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol.II, p. 206.
 5. S.L. MacGregor Mathers, The Kabbalah Unveiled, p. 21.

Another possible source of Yeats' concept of the Trinity is Burkitt's Early Eastern Christianity, a book which he mentions in several connections. Describing the characteristics of the ancient Church of Edessa and the Euphrates Valley, Burkitt says that the Syriac-speaking Church baptized in the Triple Name, of which the Holy Spirit was considered feminine :

When we speak in the Creed of 'the Lord ,the Giver of Life', we are obliged to assign a sex to the Holy Spirit ... The Greek $\piνεμα$ is of course neuter. But in Semitic languages there is no neuter ... therefore, before the influence of Greek theology made itself felt, the Holy Spirit ... is feminine. 1

In another poem, 'Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn', the two lovers find heaven to be an intensification and completion of the physical delights they have experienced on earth. Ribh reads his holy book at midnight upon the tomb of the long-dead lovers on the anniversary of their death. On that night they are united above the tomb, their embrace, now that they have become angels, is a conflagration of the entire body and so shed the light Ribh reads by.

The miracle that gave them such a death
Transfigured to pure substance what had once
Been bone and sinew; when such bodies join
There is no touching here, nor touching there,

1. F.C. Burkitt, Early Eastern Christianity, London, 1904, p. 88.

Nor straining joy, but whole is joined to whole;
For the intercourse of angels is a light
Where for its moment both seem lost, consumed. 1

T.R. Henn thinks² that this fable is a kind of correlative of an incident which had struck Yeats' imagination from the Japanese play Nishikigi, in which two lovers sorrow, as ghosts, for their unconsummated love, until the prayers of the priest whom they have brought to their tomb unite them in marriage and set them free.

In the poems which deal with the period between death and rebirth, Yeats is mainly concerned with the renewal beyond the grave of the happy moments of his life. In fact, he has taken over from Theosophy the belief that love and happiness can only be consummated after death. According to them a man's capacity for enjoyment is greatly enhanced after death; if he loves music or art or is a lover, he will have these things in the fullest sense as he never did before.³ In this Devachanic state all our passionate moments and our deep sensations will be immensely prolonged. Referring to his love for Maud Gonne, Yeats writes :

But in the grave all, all, shall be renewed.
The certainty that I shall see that lady
Leaning or standing or walking
In the first loveliness of womanhood...
Has set me muttering like a fool. 4

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 328.
 2. T.R. Henn, The Lonely Tower, p. 293.
 3. See A.P. Sinnett, Esoteric Buddhism, pp. 71-74 and C.W. Leadbeater, A Textbook of Theosophy, p. 96.
 4. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 173.

In a more serious poem, 'The Tower', he suggests that a man's after-death experiences are nothing more than the thoughts and the emotions he has allowed himself to feel during his life. He affirms that

Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock and barrel
Out of his bitter soul...
And further add to that
That, being dead, we rise,
Dream and so create
Translunar Paradise. 1

Yeats, as he himself tells us, learnt from Mohini Chatterji that 'those who die, in so far as they have imagined beauty or justice, are made a part of that beauty or justice.'² It was, therefore, natural that he should try to make his own paradise as enjoyable as possible by dwelling upon the most beautiful things ever conceived :

I have prepared my peace
With learned Italian things
And the proud stones of Greece,
Poet's imaginings
And memories of love...
All those things whereof
Man makes a superhuman
Mirror-resembling dream. 3

The poet also found confirmation of the idea in The Tibetan Book of the Dead where it is stated that for a Buddhist or a Moslem,

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 223.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'The Way of Wisdom', The Speaker, April, 1900, p. 41.
 3. Op. Cit., pp. 223-224.

or a Christian, the after-death experiences would be appropriately different. 'The Buddhist's or the Hindu's thought-forms, as in a dream state, would give rise to corresponding visions of the deities of the Buddhist or Hindu Pantheon; a Moslem's, to visions of the Moslem Paradise; a Christian's, to visions of the Christian Heaven.'¹ This conception of a subjective paradise created by the individual or collectively by the adherents of a creed, is behind one of the most puzzling poems of Yeats, 'News for the Delphic Oracle'. In the first verse of the poem he gives a picture of the Platonic heaven. This is the paradise of Pythagoras and Plotinus; a heaven of rarefied love. In the second verse the souls of the Holy Innocents, the Church's first martyrs, are seen going through a kind of purgatorial process. They re-live their past experiences but their suffering is not meant to be terrible; it is only a part of the purifying ritual before they finally join the choir of love. The third section is the poet's personal conception of heaven as a more sensual and less abstract kind of love :

Slim adolescence that a nymph has stripped,
Peleus on Thetis stares.
Her limbs are delicate as an eyelid,
Love has blinded him with tears
..... nymphs and satyrs

1. W.Y. Evans-Wentz (ed.), The Tibetan Book of the Dead, Oxford, 1927, pp. 33-34.

Copulate in the foam. 1

Yeats found in the Byzantine civilization 'an incredible splendour like that which we see pass under our closed eyelids as we lie between sleeping and waking, no representation of the living world but the dream of a somnambulist'.² Historically Byzantium represented the point of perfect fusion of the Western and Eastern cultures. Its delicate art expressed that Unity of Being which the poet considered the consummation of all possible happiness. It is not surprising therefore, that Yeats should turn the image of this 'Holy City' into a subjective vision of heaven. In 'Byzantium' which the poet wrote after a serious illness, the action is set in the world beyond the grave. The poem begins with a description of the dome of St. Sophia which he refers to in A Vision as an image of the 'Holy Wisdom' ³ :

A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins. 4

As it has been frequently pointed out, Yeats here introduces a Platonic image, for 'mire or mud', according to Plotinus, is a very ancient symbol for the corruptibility of matter. As the

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 377.
 2. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 280.
 3. Ibid.
 4. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 280.

poet proceeds on the journey through the after-death world, he meets
his guide :

Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path...
I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death. 1

This verse is the most difficult part of the poem and one that
has caused a lot of speculation. To understand the nature of
this mysterious guide, we have to refer to some of the books from
which the poet derived his knowledge of Egyptian theurgy. In
The Evolution of the Dragon, a book which still stands in Yeats'
private library,² the Egyptian conception of the Ka, the leader
of the deceased, is briefly stated :

This double or Ka ... was a kind of superior
genius intended to guide the fortunes of the
individual in the hereafter ... there he had
his abode and awaited the coming of his earthly
companion. 3

F.A. Wilson has also pointed out⁴ that Yeats had access to Isaac
Myer's Oldest Books in the World which gives a more detailed
account of the Egyptian 'Shade' :

The Shadow or Shade ... preserved the individuality
of the deceased ... the Ka was a spiritual double,

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 280.
 2. In possession of Mrs Yeats.
 3. G. Elliot Smith, The Evolution of the Dragon, London,
1919, pp. 46-47.
 4. F.A. Wilson, W.B. Yeats and Tradition, pp. 235-236.

a second perfect exemplar or copy, of his flesh, blood, body, etc., but of a matter less dense than corporeal matter... The Ka corresponded somewhat to the Latin, genius. Its original meaning may have been image ... The Ka was thought to sometimes visit the tomb in which lay its... Mummy. 1

Yeats' spirit-guide now unfolds before his eyes, as in a dream, the most blissful place he ever imagined during his life. He sees the city of Byzantium and the Emperor's tree which he celebrated in his previous poem, 'Sailing to Byzantium' :

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the star-lit golden bough... 2

The third verse gives a description of the workings of the purgatorial process as outlined by the poet himself in A Vision. The task of the discarnate spirits is to purge away the 'blood and mire' and the 'bitter furies of complexities'. In other words, they have to purify themselves of their thought-forms as well as their emotional content.

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
Where blood-begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve. 3

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1. Isaac Myer, Oldest Books in the World, London, 1900, pp. 271-274.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, pp. 280-281.
 3. Ibid., p. 281.

The source of his imagery here is the Noh play Motomezuka, whose plot Yeats himself recounts in A Vision :

I think of a girl in a Japanese play whose
ghost tells a priest of a slight sin... She
is surrounded by flames, and though the priest
explains that if she but ceased to believe in
those flames they would cease to exist, believe
she must, and the play ends in an elaborate
dance, the dance of agony. 1

In the last verse of the poem Yeats brings in the image of the
'dolphins' which escort the Holy Innocents, in 'News for the Delphic
Oracle', to their paradise.

Yeats' interest in a cyclical system, as well as in Oriental
literature is responsible for the occasional appearance in his
poetry of a philosophy of heroic contentment. This philosophy
finds expression for the first time in 'A Dialogue of Self and
Soul', a poem of The Winding Stair :

I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,
A blind man battering blind men...
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest. 2

Commenting on this poem, George Russell (A.E.), whose wide knowledge ✓
of Oriental mysticism makes him a peculiarly sympathetic critic

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 231.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 267.

of Yeats' poetry, writes, 'It may have been from his study of Zen philosophy that he came to this acceptance. The Zen philosopher discovered the possibility of a Nirvana in this world very different from the mysterious cosmic Nirvana of the founder of Buddhism. It might come upon the soul in a second that illumination which makes Earth and its creatures to appear spiritual.'¹ Yeats returned to the subject more frequently as he grew older. In a letter to Dorothy Wellesley in 1935 he wrote, 'To me the supreme aim is an act of faith and reason to make one rejoice in the midst of tragedy.'² This tragic ecstasy is the subject of his poem 'Lapis Lazuli' which is a meditation on a Chinese carving. It was written shortly after he received a gift of a large piece of lapis lazuli 'carved by some Chinese sculptor into the semblance of a mountain with temple, trees, paths, and an ascetic and pupil about to climb.'³

Two Chinamen, behind them a third,
Are carved in lapis lazuli...
There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare.
One asks for mournful melodies;
Accomplished fingers begin to play.
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay. 4

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1. George Russell (A.E.), 'The Winding Stair', The Irish Statesman, February, 1930, p. 436.
 2. Dorothy Wellesley (ed.), Letters on Poetry, p. 13.
 3. A. Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 837.
 4. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 339.

In the world of history, as well as in the world of generation, things rise and fall and this is no matter for pathos. It is a necessary part of the scene :

All things fall and are built again,
And those that build them again are gay. 1

The most effective expression of this thought appears in 'The Gyres' where a terrifying atmosphere is produced by the acceptance of the mutability of things. The poet welcomes the turning of the wheel with heroic disdain. In the face of the conflicting rise and fall of civilization, the proper attitude is 'tragic joy' for all things will be renewed in the Circle of Destiny :

What matter ? Out of ~~the~~ cavern comes a voice,
And all it knows is that one word 'Rejoice ! ' 2

It may be suitable to conclude this chapter by discussing the philosophic poem 'Meru', named after India's holy mountain. The poet wrote it immediately after reading Bhagwan Shri Hamsa's book, The Holy Mountain. Mount Meru, round which the cosmos is disposed in seven concentric circles of golden mountains, is the universal hub in Buddhist and Hindu cosmography. It attracted Yeats mainly as a symbol of a 'subjective' tradition in which men and gods are closely related. In his introduction to Shri Hamsa's book, he

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 339.
 2. Ibid., p. 337.

writes :

Meru ... was the most famous of all mountains...
an outer ring for all, an inner and more
perilous for those called ... to its greater
penance. On another ring, higher yet ... the
Gods move in adoration. Still greater numbers
have known it from the Mahabharata or from the
poetry of Kalidas, known that ... sacred swans
sing there ... that at certain seasons from the
lake springs a golden Phallos ... in this mountain
a dozen races find the birth-place of their Gods
and of themselves. 1

The poem, however, is an attempt to describe the ultimate reality
that the hermits on Mount Meru hope to attain at the end of their
struggle. The poet suggests, with the Hindu ascetics, that this
world is nothing but illusion :

Civilization is hooped together, brought
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
By manifold illusion ... 2

Man does his best to strip illusion away but the reality which
he is left with turns out to be something like the 'nothingness'
or the Nirvana of the Buddhists :

And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravaging through century after century,
Ravaging, raging, and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality ... 3

In a letter to Sturge Moore the poet writes, 'We free ourselves

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1. Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, The Holy Mountain, Yeats' intro. pp. 19-20.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 333.
 3. Ibid.

from obsession that we may be nothing. The last kiss is given to the void.'¹

During his ascent of Mount Meru Bhagwan Shri Hamsa travelled through storm and hail, bathing 'twice a day in icy water' and spending nights 'in hollows of the ice'.² The account of the terrible hardships he had to endure during his pilgrimage left their mark on Yeats' poem :

Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,
Caverned in night under the drifted snow,
Or where that snow and winter's dreadful blast
Beat down upon their naked bodies, know
That day brings round the night, that before dawn
His glory and his monuments are gone. 3

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1. Ursula Bridge (ed.), W.B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore : Their Correspondence 1901-1937, p. 154.
 2. Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, The Holy Mountain, Yeats' intro. pp. 22-25.
 3. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 334.

THE POET IN THE THEATRE

'Tragic art, passionate art, the drowner of
dykes, the confounder of understanding,
moves us by setting us to reverie, by alluring
us almost to the intensity of trance.'

W.B. Yeats¹

'... it is natural that I go to Asia for a
stage-convention, for more formal faces, for
a chorus that has no part in the action, and
perhaps for those movements of the body copied
from the marionette shows of the fourteenth
century.'

W.B. Yeats²

Yeats' interest in the theatre and the drama springs from
a desire, cherished from his earliest years, to hear his own poetry
spoken. The experiments he made with Dolmetsch and Florence Farr,
in devising a method of reciting verse to musical notes were partly

1. W.B. Yeats, 'The Cutting of an Agate', Essays, pp. 302-303.

2. Ibid., p. 279.

related to his efforts to produce poetic drama. He wanted plays that would be 'spiritual and ideal'¹ and hoped to hear fine speakers make great poems greater. It is not surprising therefore, that throughout his career in the theatre, Yeats remained, first and foremost, a lyric poet. Although he occasionally achieves theatrical effectiveness, we find, on the whole, that the lyrical content of his plays far surpasses the dramatic. In his essay 'The Tragic Theatre', he repudiates the idea that the dramatic moment is always the contest of wills and insists that character is present in comedy alone. In tragedy there is no place for character; there can only be passions and motives. The ultimate aim of tragedy should be the creation of a sense of ecstatic beauty and peace.

As a playwright, Yeats could hardly escape the mystical philosophies that constantly inform his poetry. In fact, his development as a dramatist reflects clearly and chronologically many of the Eastern and pseudo-Eastern ideas which he came across as a poet. His early plays are deeply saturated with the Sankara philosophy which maintains that the world is an illusion and that external life is a deception imposed upon us by our senses. Chatterji taught him that there is a deeper reality than any that can be reached

1. W.B. Yeats, 'Ideas of Good and Evil', Essays, p. 205.

by observation. It is the reality of imagination, of dreams that come to us from recollection when we withdraw the mind into itself, in meditation. As an artist Yeats subscribed to this philosophy and began to work out its implications. He soon came to the conclusion that 'the long decline of the arts' has been 'but the shadow of declining faith in an unseen reality'.¹ Inspired by this philosophy he set his early plays in the dreamland in which so much of his early poetry has been written. The legendary and mythical material involved in these plays is not used for its picturesque quality, but because it opens for him the world of an underlying reality; the world he is trying to escape to from the external life of action. The 'old stories of the folk', he wrote in 1904, 'were made by men who believed so much in the soul, and so little in anything else, that they were never entirely certain that the earth was solid under the foot-sole.'² The shadowy life of legend therefore formed an approach to a deeper reality and helped to call up 'images that remind us of passions, the vagueness of past times, all the chimeras that haunt the edge of trance.'³

The Shadowy Waters was first published as a dramatic poem and performed in this version in 1904 in the Molesworth Hall,

1. W.B. Yeats, Plays and Controversies, London, 1923, p. 124.

2. Ibid., p. 123.

3. W.B. Yeats, 'The Cutting of an Agate', Essays, pp. 300-301.

Dublin. It played badly enough from the point of view of an ordinary playgoer and Yeats gave it to Florence Farr to present it at a Theosophical Convention. The poet attended this presentation and, with it fresh in mind, went about the task of re-writing and condensing it for the performance of 1906 at the Abbey Theatre. The play is a tapestry of dreams and visions woven in the most delicate verse. The hero, Forgael, is the captain of a ship who has found mortal love 'like the froth upon the ale', and is sailing in search of a mythic land in which the women cast no shadows, having lived before the making of the earth. He is lured to this adventure by the spirits of the dead who have turned into man-headed birds, and fly around the ship to guide him. Having sailed the shadowy waters for three moons in search of the country of dreams, the members of his crew rebel and ask him

Aibric. ... to live like other men,
 And drive impossible dreams away. 1

Forgael tries to persuade them that the world and our passions are only the shadow of a reality beyond perception :

Forgael. It's not a dream,
 But the reality that makes our passion
 As a lamp shadow -- no -- no lamp, the sun.
 What the world's million lips are thirsting for
 Must be substantial somewhere. 2

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, London, 1952, p. 151.
 2. Ibid.

The crew plot his death, but they fear the power of his magic harp. During the quarrel the sailors sight a richly laden vessel with a king and queen embracing on the deck and they go and capture the galley and kill the king. Queen Dectora, one of the prisoners, reproaches Forgael for the murder of her husband. Forgael goes into a trance in which he sees her as the woman the magic birds have sent him, and is disappointed that fate should thus bring him a mortal woman. He plays his harp and the sailors pass into a state of dream. Dectora, too, dreams and when she wakes up she finds herself in love with Forgael. But he disdains the love of the senses and prepares to leave her, when all of a sudden her eyes are opened and for her, as for him, the mortal life of illusion begins to wither away, and she cares 'to gaze upon the world no longer'.¹

Dectora. ... O ancient worm,
Dragon that loved the world and held us to it,
You are broken, you are broken. The world
drifts away...²

And Forgael answers :

Forgael. ... we grow immortal;
And that old harp awakens of itself
To cry aloud to the grey birds, and dreams,
That have had dreams for father, live in us.³

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 167.

2. Ibid., pp. 166-167.

3. Ibid., p. 167.

When the play was performed at the Abbey Theatre, Yeats decided to make the stage setting symbolic. It showed the deck of a galley, with a sail which had a pattern of three rows of hounds, the first dark, the second red, and the third white with red ears. In the programme note¹ Yeats offered the suggestion that these might correspond to the Tamas, Rajas, and Sattva qualities of the Vedanta philosophy. In other words, the hounds symbolise thesis, antithesis, and reconciliation. Forgael and Dectora represent the first two, and their final union is the achievement of a kind of wisdom or reconciliation.

Where there is Nothing was written in a fortnight to save from a plagiarist (George Moore) a subject that seemed worth the keeping till greater knowledge of the stage made an adequate treatment possible. Later, with the help of Lady Gregory, he transformed the tragedy into a folk play, The Unicorn from the Stars. The protagonist, Paul Ruttledge, is 'an ascetic such as we might find in India or in the Arabian desert, in conflict with the stabilized thought and habits of a Western civilization.'² He is a dreamer and a visionary who finds no satisfaction in the duties of a landlord, nor in the society about him. In fact, he finds the life of action

1. See R. Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, p. 81.

2. U. Ellis-Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement, London, 1939, p. 104.

altogether vulgar and prefers to remain idle. His friends and relatives reproach him for his idleness and urge him to do something useful.

Thomas Rutledge. I wish he would join something...
It is not a right life for him to
keep hanging about the place doing
nothing. 1

They try to explain to him that the world cannot go on without work and he exclaims :

Paul Rutledge. ... Why should the world go on ? ...
Let us send messengers everywhere to
tell the people to stop working, and
then the world may come to an end. 2

In one short sentence that could very well sum up the whole Sankaric philosophy of Chatterji, he adds, 'I will never dip my hand into nature's full sack of illusions; I am tired of that conjuring bag.'³ Eventually, he resolves to break away from the world for good and all, and leaving his possessions to his brother, he dons a ragged coat and like an Indian monk he begs his food on the roads. After many adventures his delicate constitution is undermined and he falls ill. He is taken to a monastery and in due time he becomes a friar. He begins to practise meditation and falls regularly into trance and as a result he breaks from the orthodoxy of the church. A

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1. W.B. Yeats, Plays for an Irish Theatre, London, 1903-1907, Vol.I, p. 16.
 2. Ibid., pp. 63-64.
 3. Ibid., p. 117.

strange mood seizes upon him, a passion to reach a mystical union with the infinite, a thirst for something like the Nirvana of the Buddhists. He teaches his brother friars to escape the world of individual and mortal limitations. They must learn 'to get out of the body while still alive'; they 'must so live that all things shall pass away.'¹ He preaches to them the highway to the infinite through the destruction, so far as the individual mind is concerned, of all laws, philosophies, institutions, all worldly hopes, and of 'thought the waster of life' :

Paul Ruttledge. ... we cannot destroy the world with armies, it is inside our minds that it must be destroyed, it must be consumed in a moment inside our minds... 2

This he called the 'getting above law and number and becoming king and priest in one's own house'.³ When the world has been snuffed out like a candle, then that place is reached 'where there is nothing that is anything, and nobody that is anybody; one can be free there where there is nothing', for 'where there is nothing there is God.'⁴ The superior, hearing of this strange doctrine, expels Paul and his disciples from the monastery. He leaves together with some of the friars, and begs his food again on the roads,

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1. W.B. Yeats, Plays for an Irish Theatre, Vol.I, p. 86.
 2. Ibid., p. 121.
 3. Ibid., pp. 80-81.
 4. Ibid., p. 98.

abandoning himself to the religious ecstasy which, in its destruction of the individual mind, seems to the more orthodox fellow monks like a kind of spiritual suicide. Finally, in an effort to convert the peasantry whose fury is excited by something they cannot comprehend, he falls a victim to the mob.

There are many references in the play to the Indian doctrine of Karma. During a trance, for example, Paul sees a great crowd of strange beings which he describes as 'the part of mankind that is not human; the part that builds up the things that keep the soul from God.'¹ In the later version of the play, The Unicorn from the Stars, Johnny assures Nanny that for her wickedness she 'will be moving through the ages, chains upon you, and you in the form of a dog or a monster.'² Yeats has also tried in this play to give a simple description of the Nirvana of the Buddhists :

Colman. When I was meditating, the inside of my head suddenly became all on fire.

Aloysius. While I was meditating I felt a spout of fire going up between my shoulders. 3

The poet described Nirvana many years later in his poem 'Lapis Lazuli' as 'Heaven blazing into the head'.⁴

The difference of thought between Where there is Nothing and The Unicorn from the Stars is not great, for the great passages

1. W.B. Yeats, Plays for an Irish Theatre, Vol.I, pp. 86-87.

2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 369.

3. Op.Cit., p. 93.

4. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 338.

that lead up to the climax are substantially the same in both plays. In The Unicorn from the Stars the protagonist is no longer an aristocratic landlord, he is a coach-builder named Martin Hearne who is thrown into a trance by a flash of light on the golden unicorn which he had carved to ornament one of his carriages. Hearne also undertakes to destroy the world of action and illusion. ✓ In this version of the play the unicorn symbolises the elemental spirit 'above law and number'. The image of the unicorn trampling grapes and wheat is derived from a Japanese myth which struck Yeats' imagination. In Dhoya, one of his early short stories, he tells of a Japanese painter who 'had painted on a temple wall the horse that every evening descended and trampled the rice-fields...'¹

Martin Hearne's conception of heaven is remarkably Theosophical. He describes it as a consum^mation of all the happiness we experience on earth :²

Martin. Father John, Heaven is not what we have believed it to be. It is not quiet, it is not singing and making music, and all strife at an end. I have seen it, I have been there. The lover still loves, but with a greater passion, and the rider still rides, but the horse goes like the wind...³

In spite of its Irish setting, The Land of Heart's Desire is

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Works, Vol.VII, p. 285.
 2. See chapter IV
 3. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 381.

also a representation of the incompatible qualities of the active and contemplative life. The dramatic conflict is between the love of this world and the deep, incalculable love of that old world of the Sidhe, where

The wind blows out of the gates of the day,
The wind blows over the lonely of heart,
And the lonely of heart is withered away... 1

In this play the fairyland stands for the real world beyond this world. It expresses the mood in which 'The Hosting of the Sidhe' is written : 'Away, come away: Empty your heart of its mortal dream.'² It tells of Mary, the young bride of Shawn Bruin, who can find no content in the dull world of action and domestic tasks. She is a delicate, dreamy girl who is attracted by fairy lore. Shawn's mother complains to the priest that she would not get up at dawn to 'mend and scour' :

Bridget. She would not mind the kettle, milk the cow,
Or even lay the knives and spread the cloth. 3

In vain the priest advises the girl not to fill her head with foolish dreams. Unhappy and discontent she calls upon the fairies on a 'May Eve' :

Mary. Come, faeries, take me out of this dull house !
Let me have all the freedom I have lost...
Faeries, come take me out of this dull world,

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 72.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Poems, p. 61.
 3. Op.Cit., p. 54.

For I would ride with you upon the wind. 1

She places herself in the power of the fairies by giving them food and fire. A fairy child enters the kitchen, and, after persuading the priest to remove the crucifix, she lures Mary to the land of heart's desire where

... beauty has no ebb, decay no flood,
But joy is wisdom, time an endless song. 2

In The Hour Glass, first produced in 1903, a Wise Man who stands for materialist philosophy and the supremacy of reason denies the existence of the invisible world. He teaches his pupils to deny, for 'there is nothing we cannot touch, nothing we cannot see.'³ Teigue, the fool, alone remains obdurate in belief, laughing at his false wisdom.

Wise Man. Though they call him Teigue the Fool, he is not more foolish than everybody used to be, with their dreams and their preachings... I have done with dreams, I have done with dreams. 4

The Wise Man's assurance, however, is shaken by the appearance of an angel who warns him that he must die within the hour unless he can find but one soul that still believes. He calls his pupils to tell them that he

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 61.

2. Ibid., p. 69.

3. Ibid., p. 320.

4. W.B. Yeats, Plays for an Irish Theatre, Vol.II, pp. 164-166.

Wise Man. ... can explain all now.
Only when all our hold on life is troubled,
Only in spiritual terror can the Truth
Come through the broken mind... 1

But all the pupils have been so well schooled by the philosopher
that he can find no one who is not materialist and atheist. The
Wise Man submits and is humble; he bows to the will of God :

Wise Man. And now that it's too late I see it all :
We perish into God and sink away
Into reality -- the rest's a dream. 2

He makes the discovery that the perception of reality comes with
the annihilation of the self. Man will find God when he has been
stripped of everything.

In The King's Threshold (1903), the same subject is treated
again, this time in the form of a quarrel between a poet and a king.
The poet, Seanchan, exalts vision as the source of all spiritual
wisdom before which all other values must give way, but the king
and his 'Bishops, Soldiers, and Makers of the Law' stand for all
that is practical and useful and insist on removing Seanchan, the
dreamer, from his seat at the king's table to one lower down. The
poet will not submit to this indignity. He goes out to the steps
before the king's palace and lies there, obstinately refusing all
food till he dies.

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 318.
 2. Ibid., p. 322.

From this brief survey of Yeats' early plays, it becomes apparent that they are all dominated by the spirit of the Sankara philosophy. They repudiate the actual world as much as the poetry and the prose of the 'Celtic Twilight' period repudiate it. Discussing the dramas of this early phase, A.E. Malone rejects the opinion of those who contend that because of his preoccupation with Celtic lore Yeats has shown himself to be Irish and Celtic :

... there is more of Asia than of Europe in it, and more of India than of Ireland; they [Yeats' plays] present Irish legend in a setting of Oriental mysticism. The outlines of his plays... are Irish... but the philosophy with which they are filled is neither of pre-Christian nor Christian Ireland. 1

Towards the end of this experimental period, Yeats became increasingly interested in the theatre. Between 1903 and 1913 he devoted a great deal of his time to the study of drama and stage-craft. The essays and articles he wrote at the time clearly indicate his intense dislike of the naturalistic drama that was becoming fashionable at the turn of the century. He was determined, on the other hand, to introduce to the theatre what he thought to be a more lasting kind of literature, a drama that deals primarily with 'reverie', with the 'adventures of the soul'.² In order to

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1. A.E. Malone, The Irish Drama, London, 1929, p. 131.
 2. W.B. Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 87.

achieve this end, a dramatist must select and separate from life 'a group of figures, images, symbols' that would enable his audience 'to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation.'¹ Evidently this type of play could not be produced in the theatre of commerce which was specially moulded to serve an art that emphasised externality in life and thought. The modern actor, thoroughly trained in the reproduction of the mimicries of the surface of life, was also ill-fitted for a drama whose appeal was to the imagination and not to the superficial appearances of nature.

... in poetical drama... we must get rid of
everything that is restless... we must
substitute for the movements that the eye
sees the nobler movements that the heart sees,
the rhythmical movements that seem to flow
up into the imagination from some deeper life... 2

The acting and the setting in a Yeatsian drama must therefore play a subsidiary role. In 1903 he wrote, 'I think the theatre must be reformed in its plays, its speaking, its acting, and its scenery.'³ In speech, gesture and setting he would have simplification of everything that might detract from, or interfere with the verse or prose cadences of the words and the intensity of emotions.

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'The Cutting of an Agate', Essays, p. 278.
 2. W.B. Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 48.
 3. Ibid., p. 45.

Because the words in his poetical drama were remote from real life, the actors must move slowly and there should be something decorative and rhythmical in their movements. We should be content to suggest a scene upon a flat canvas for this would give our mind's eye liberty and allow us to follow the moods of the play and to turn our minds to meditation. The poet, he thought, could not 'evoke a picture to the mind's eye if a second-rate painter has set his imagination of it before the bodily eye.'¹

In his attempts to seek precedent, Yeats went to the Greek drama, to the Mystery and Miracle plays, to the classical drama of France and even to the theatre of Sara Bernhardt. But he soon found out that the civilization which had taught him to renounce and reject the external world as transitory and ephemeral had developed a culture based upon this philosophy; and once more he turned to the East where he found in Sanskrit drama much that went to confirm and to crystallize his theories. Speaking to a gathering of Indian students in 1918, he said that at one period of his literary career he had tried 'to steep himself in translations of the Sanskrit plays, and to assimilate for use in his writings whatever in them seemed valuable and congenial.'² He also learnt

1. W.B. Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 135.

2. C.L. Wrenn, W.B. Yeats: A Literary Study, pp. 12-13.

from Ananda Coomaraswamy's The Mirror of Gesture (which still stands in his private library)¹, a great deal about Indian stagecraft. Coomaraswamy emphasises the fact that 'Indian acting is poetic art, while modern European acting, apart from any question of words, is prose, or imitation.'² He pours scorn upon the spectator who seeks in drama the statement of fact rather than the experience of joy and declares that this special experience depends upon the spectator's own capacities. 'It is their own effort by which the audience is delighted, just as in the case of children whose imagination bestows upon their toys varied and abundant life.'³ He argues that the actor, who seeks to depict what he calls the 'drama of heaven', is not a god, and therefore can only attain to perfect art through conscious discipline. As the text of the play remains the same whoever the actor may be, there is no reason why an accepted gesture-language (angikābhinaya) should not be established regardless of the actor's personality. He also points out that the Indian actor relies only to a very small extent on properties, and still less on scenery. Indian acting or dancing -- the same word, Nāṭya, covers both ideas -- is thus a deliberate art, a ritual.

1. In Mrs Yeats' possession.

2. A. Coomaraswamy and G.K. Duggirala, The Mirror of Gesture, Oxford, 1917, p. 5.

3. Ibid., pp. 6-7.

This dramatic technique must have pleased Yeats immensely for he required his theatre to produce ecstasy and peace rather than katharsis. He did not want to create character, for character 'grows with time, like the ashes of a burning stick.'¹ He also urged his actors to half-chant the words given to them without drawing attention to themselves, for he thought that actors attempting to individualise would destroy his verse. On the whole, we find Yeats, towards the end of this period, moving with great self-confidence towards a stylised form of drama. His scenery grows progressively more simple, his verse more formal, and character comes to be no more than suggested.

The discovery of the Japanese Noh plays was the next important landmark in Yeats' development as a playwright. Ezra Pound who acted as his secretary in the winter of 1914-1915, was the literary executor of Ernest Fenollosa, a scholar who spent many years studying the Noh drama. Yeats immediately saw the relation of these plays to his work and realized that he found at last the ideal models which could provide the answer for many of his technical problems. He was delighted to learn from Pound that the Noh drama was a symbolic and allusive art and that it was written for the few; for the

1. W.B. Yeats, 'The Cutting of an Agate', Essays, p. 298.

nobles, for those trained to catch the allusion.

... the Noh stage ... is a symbolic stage, a drama of masks... It is a theatre of which both Mr Yeats and Mr Craig may approve. It is not like our theatre, a place where every fineness and subtlety must give way; where every fineness of word or of word cadence is sacrificed to the 'broad effects'; where the paint must be put on with a broom. 1

The Noh drama flourished in Japan in the fifteenth century and was revived again in the second half of the nineteenth century. It arose out of religious rites, practised at festivals held in honour of the Shinto deities. These rites were only pantomimic dances and songs at first, but when the spoken word was introduced, a kind of lyrical drama in which dance and song played a prominent part was developed. The appeal of these plays was not primarily to the intellect or to the emotions through the intellect, but to deeper centres of being through subtle religious channels. They sought an atmosphere through beauty of sound and magic of movement, together with an association of ideas not clearly expressed, or even consciously understood. Although they are short and their plots are simple, these plays convey much meaning through interwoven allusions to poems, legends and Buddhist hymns. The subject of a Noh play is usually one of prayer, mystery, love, recollection

1. E.Pound and E. Fenollosa, 'Noh' or Accomplishment, Pound's note pp. 5-6.

or longing; and the central character is often a ghost of a legendary hero or a fairy. We are shown these apparitions operating under the conditions of spiritual life; we observe what forces have changed them. In this way we look back into the lives of people viewing their emotions in perspective to life as a whole. Life can be seen truly from a distance through the glass of meditation. This necessary distancing was brought about partly through lack of differentiation between one character and another; and partly because the chorus sometimes spoke the actor's words for him. Thus we never find in these plays, as we find in Shakespeare's plays for example, a certain situation or character set out and analysed. They only present, or symbolise, a complete pattern of life and recurrence for they are meant to convey the emotion of Yugen, which is translated both as 'ideal beauty' and as 'mysterious calm'.

The Noh plays were usually played as private performances at a palace or a nobleman's house. The theatres, which were especially built for these plays were smaller than the common theatres. The stage was a square platform which stood towards the middle, so that the audience could sit on three sides of it. There was no

scenery and the images of the places in which the action took place were evolved by the spectators in their own minds, guided by the descriptive passages of the play. The properties of the Noh stage were of a highly conventionalized kind. An open framework represented a boat; another differing little from it, denoted a chariot. Palace, house, cottage and hovel were all represented by four posts covered with a roof. The masked actors (or dancers) dressed in gorgeous and elaborate costumes entered slowly the stage one by one with long intervals between each step. These actors had a highly expressive vocabulary of motion and eloquence of gesture which had been decreed for centuries. In fact, every actor was instructed in the precepts and traditions of the Noh by his father, and handed them on to his son. These instructions were secret, for all teaching was regarded as a form of mystic initiation. The number of characters in a Noh play was limited; but each play had at least two chief characters, the 'skiti' and the 'waki', who spoke, acted and danced. The dance, consisting usually of slow steps and solemn gestures, had little resemblance to what is in Europe associated with the word 'dance'. There was also a chorus of ten or twelve people and a number of musicians who sat in a side extension of the stage. The songs were given

with a curious voice in which breathing is suppressed. Other parts of the play were chanted in unison, and even the prose 'words' were intoned in a unique way which removed them absolutely from the realm of ordinary speaking and made them practically indistinguishable from songs. The function of the chorus and the musicians was simply lyrical and they drew the characters of the play up with them on to a lyrical plane remote from the world of everyday conflicts.

Yeats found the subject matter as well as the dramatic technique of the Noh plays quite exciting. The spiritual and aristocratic tradition behind them and their lyrical and symbolic qualities appealed to his native tendencies. The combination of speech, song, music and ritual dance fascinated him because it represented the culmination of a perfectly controlled art. In these dance-plays, the actors were masked and there was no straining after realism which was, in his view, draining the force of the theatre in the West. Above all, the Noh drama provided him with an ideal medium which made the exposition of a dreamy or visionary 'reality' possible. In 1916 Yeats finally declared, 'I have found my model -- and in literature if we would not be parvenus we must have a model -- in the 'Noh' stage of aristocratic Japan'¹ :

1. W.B. Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 416.

I want to create for myself an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many... I want ... half-a-dozen young men and women who can dance and speak verse or play drum and flute and zither... I desire a mysterious art... doing its work by suggestion, not by direct statement... a memory and a prophecy... I seek not a theatre but the theatre's anti-self. 1

In his essay 'Certain Noble Plays of Japan', he gives an account of his conception of the Noh plays. The gods, goddesses and ghosts of these plays, he declares, remind him of Irish legends and beliefs. He finds that in Hagoromo,

The feather-mantle, for whose lack the moon goddess (or should we call her fairy ?) cannot return to the sky, is the red cap whose theft can keep our fairies of the sea upon dry land; and the ghost-lovers in Nishikigi remind me of the Aran boy and girl who... come to the priest after death to be married. These Japanese poets, too, feel for tomb and wood the emotion... that our Gaelic-speaking country people will sometimes show... 2

When Yeats produced the Four Plays for Dancers, which he wrote on the Noh model, he insisted that 'all must be played to the accompaniment of drum, zither and flute' and that the actors 'must move a little stiffly and gravely like marionettes.'³ The cast in each case contains three musicians 'whose seeming sunburned faces' suggest that they 'have wandered from village to village

1. W.B. Yeats, Plays and Controversies, pp. 212-215.

2. W.B. Yeats, 'The Cutting of an Agate', Essays, p. 287.

3. Op. Cit., p. 331.

in some country of our dreams.¹ These musicians act as a chorus, singing or reciting verse at the beginning and the end of the play and sometimes they speak the part of a character (they speak the words of the severed head in A Full Moon In March). They also describe to the audience, in the absence of scenery, the place, the weather and at moments the action itself. In brief, they are used to dispense with naturalism and to give the whole proceeding an air of ritual. Acting is slow and stylized in these plays; and whenever a moment of great passion occurs, the actors represent it by a pantomimic dance to the accompaniment of drum-beats. On the whole, music, dancing, verse and action in these plays are meant to be complementary and harmonious. The Four Plays for Dancers are almost impossible to perform by ordinary theatrical companies, since their production calls for an expert dancer, trained in the artistic tradition of the East. As to the subject matter of the plays, Yeats regretfully declares that they 'could only fully succeed in a civilization very much unlike ours'²:

I think they [Four Plays for Dancers] should be written for some country where all classes share in a half-mythological, half-philosophical folk belief which the writer and his small audience lift into a new subtlety. All my life I have longed for such a country...³

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'The Cutting of an Agate', Essays, p. 273.
 2. W.B. Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 434.
 3. Ibid.

At the Hawk's Well, Yeats' first Noh play, was performed in April 1916, in a friend's drawing-room, and only those who cared for poetry were invited. It was played without a platform, and the stage was a bare space in front of a wall against which was placed a patterned screen. Three musicians mark the beginning of the play by unfolding a black cloth so that it forms a triangle. During this ceremony they sing and in their song they describe the scene where the action takes place :

The Musicians. I call to the eye of the mind
A well long choked up and dry
And boughs long stripped by the wind,
And I call to the mind's eye
Pallor of an ivory face...

First Musician. Night falls;
The Mountain-side grows dark... 1

The number of characters in the play is limited to three, an Old Man, a Young Man and the Guardian of the Well. The Old Man has spent his life beside the well, which symbolises wisdom and immortality. Every time the miraculous water has flown out, the old man has been put to sleep by the Guardian of the Well. A Young Man, who turns out to be Cuchulain, arrives on the scene and is warned by the Old Man against the mountain-witch. But Cuchulain does

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, pp. 208-209.

not heed the warning for he has a strong belief in his own luck. In the end, however, he is also deceived by the Guardian of the Well -- a being half bird, half woman, who lures him away by her dance which is actually the nucleus of the play. When Cuchulain returns he finds that the secret moment has passed and neither he nor the Old Man could get a drop of the water. The Chorus grimly concludes that he who searches for wisdom must lead a hard and bitter life.

At the Hawk's Well, which was originally entitled The Waters of Immortality, conforms to the Japanese formula . Masks were worn by the speaking characters -- the Old Man and the Young Man; the musicians and the Guardian of the Well, had their faces painted to resemble masks. The central situation was the dance and that was made possible by a Japanese dancer named Michio Ito. Late in 1915 Ezra Pound discovered him living in poverty in a backstairs room in London. Ito had in fact acted in the Noh plays, and the intensity of his movements in the dance of the hawk made a great impression on Yeats :

... he [Ito] was able, as he rose from the floor, where he had been sitting crossed-legged, or as he threw out an arm, to recede from us into some more powerful life... he receded, but to inhabit

as it were the deeps of the mind. 1

The subject matter of the play is symbolic and is built round the 'half-supernatural legendary person'² of Cuchulain and a kind of mysterious, luring divinity which possesses a girl, transforming her into a sort of goddess or hawk to guard the fountain of wisdom and eternal youth. Yeats himself, it should be remembered, characterises the adventures embodied in the Noh plays as 'the meeting with ghost, god, or goddess at some holy place or much-legended tomb.'³

Yeats' next Japanese play, The Only Jealousy of Emer, written in 1919, uses the Cuchulain legend again. It is written as a sequel to On Baile's Strand in which Cuchulain fights and kills an unknown warrior who turns out to be his own son begot on some wild woman when he was young. Overcome with grief he madly rushes to fight the waves of the sea. The Only Jealousy of Emer opens in an old fisher's cottage where Cuchulain is shown lying in grave-clothes on his bed, while his wife, Emer, and his mistress, Eithne Inguba, stand beside his seemingly bewitched body, trying to draw back his soul from the Sidhe.

Emer. An image has been put into his place,
A sea-born log bewitched into his likeness... 4

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1. W.B. Yeats, 'The Cutting of an Agate', Essays, p. 277.
 2. W.B. Yeats, Four Plays for Dancers, notes pp. 86-87.
 3. Op. Cit., p. 287.
 4. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, pp.284-285.

Emer makes Eithne Inguba kiss the dead body, and the kiss brings to life a person called the Figure of Cuchulain, who has a withered arm and a distorted face. Eithne Inguba turns and flies from the cottage in terror and the Figure declares that his real name is Bricriu of the Sidhe. He adds,

Figure of Cuchulain. I show my face, and everything he loves
Must fly away... 1

When Emer answers that she has not fled away, he rejoins : 'You are not loved'. He tells her that she must give up all claim to the companionship of old age with Cuchulain or else the Sidhe will take him in death. A touch of Bricriu's hand on Emer's eyes makes her see the ghost of her husband crouching on the floor near the bed. Fand, a Woman of the Sidhe, appears and tries to persuade the ghost to forget wife and mistress and to give himself in death to her. The ghost of Cuchulain, being still attached to the world, hesitates to accept her invitation at first. But when Emer sees that he is about to abandon himself to her, she promises to renounce her love for him. Cuchulain wakes up to life immediately and calls for Eithne Inguba, his mistress.

The Only Jealousy of Emer is the first play that Yeats wrote after the automatic writing of his wife had started. This accounts

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 288.

for the appearance in the play of patches of doctrine as well as of imagery drawn from the phases of the moon. The introductory verses, sung by the musicians, refer to the emotional toil that the soul has to suffer in life after life, before it reaches the phases of the greatest beauty :

First Musician. How many centuries spent
The sedentary soul
In toils of measurement
Beyond eagle or mole,
Beyond hearing or seeing,
Or Archimedes' guess,
To raise into being
That loveliness ? 1

In a note on this drama Yeats declares that he has filled it with convictions about the nature and history of a woman's beauty, which Robartes found in the Speculum of Gyraldus and in Arabia Deserta among the Judwalis.² Fand, the Woman of the Sidhe, is a discarnate spirit of the fifteenth phase and thus represents complete subjectivity and the greatest beauty a woman can ever attain. This accounts for her instinctive attraction to Cuchulain whom Yeats has described as a 'solar hero',³ a representative of objectivity :

Ghost of Cuchulain. Who is it stands before me there
Shedding such light from limb and hair
As when the moon, complete at last
With every labouring crescent past,
And lonely with extreme delight,
Flings out upon the fifteenth night ?

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, pp. 281-282.
 2. W.B. Yeats, Four Plays for Dancers, notes, p. 105.
 3. P. Allt and R. Alspach (eds.), The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, notes, p. 807.

Woman of the Sidhe. Because I long I am not complete. 1

In her attempt to achieve an antithetical union, Fand wants Cuchulain to give himself up to her :

Woman of the Sidhe. When your mouth and my mouth meet
All my round shall be complete... 2

Cuchulain, however, has not reached complete objectivity (that is why his ghost is still troubled by memories of this world) and this makes the union difficult, if not impossible at this stage:

Woman of the Sidhe. I am ashamed
That being of the deathless shades I chose
A man so knotted to impurity. 3

In this play the use of masks is very important to Yeats for he is dealing with a subject found in many Noh plays; that of demonic possession. By using three different masks he signifies whether the person speaking is the Figure of Cuchulain, his own self or his ghostly self. Bricriu (the Figure of Cuchulain) is meant to be his daimon and the ghost is his linga sharira or astral body. This astral body, P. Sinnett explains, is an ethereal duplicate of the physical body :

At death it [the astral body] is disembodied for a brief period, and, under some abnormal conditions, may even be temporarily visible to... living persons. Under such conditions it is taken of course for the

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 291.
 2. Ibid., pp. 292-293.
 3. W.B. Yeats, Four Plays for Dancers, p. 46.

ghost of the departed person... When seen at all
it can only be seen near where the physical body
still lies. 1

In his essay 'Certain Noble Plays of Japan', Yeats admired
the Noh dramatists' practice of building a drama on a single image
or metaphor :

I wonder am I fanciful in discovering in the plays
themselves a playing upon a single metaphor, as
deliberate as the echoing rhythm of line in Chinese
and Japanese painting. 2

In The Only Jealousy of Emer, as well as in At the Hawk's Well,
Yeats tries to follow this convention. In the former the image
of the sea returns again and again in metaphor and incident.
The sea is repeatedly mentioned as dangerous, inimical and eternal
in the musicians introductory song and in the dialogue of the
characters. Cuchulain himself, sword in hand, tried to fight
'the deathless sea' but the 'water had swept over him'.³ 'The
shining bitter sea' is the chief enemy that Emer and Eithne Inguba
have to fight :

Beyond the open door the bitter sea,
The shining, bitter sea, is crying out,
White shell, white wing ! 4

They are only 'but two women struggling with the sea'.⁵ In her

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1. A.P. Sinnett, Esoteric Buddhism, p. 23.
 2. W.B. Yeats, 'The Cutting of an Agate', Essays, p. 289.
 3. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 284.
 4. Ibid., p. 283.
 5. Ibid., p. 286.

attempt to save the hero, Emer finds it necessary to 'cover up his face to hide the sea' and to 'throw new logs upon the hearth' for

Emer. ... all the enchantments of the dreaming foam
Dread the hearth-fire. 1

The Woman of ^{the} Sidhe and Bricriu, the two most dangerous and mysterious characters of the play, come also out of the sea. The play ends with Eithne Inguba's shout of victory, 'it is I that won him from the sea'.²

In At the Hawk's Well, the land where the action takes place is suffering from extreme drought :

The Musicians. I call to the eye of the mind
A well long choked up and dry
And boughs long stripped by the wind... 3

The empty well round which there are only 'withered leaves',
'old thorn-trees' and rocks belongs 'to all that's old and withered'.⁴

Cuchulain says to the Old Man :

Young Man. You seem as dried up as the leaves and sticks,
As though you had no part in life. 5

And the play ends with musicians singing :

The Musicians. I have found hateful eyes
Among the desolate places,
Unfaltering, unmoistened eyes. 6

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 286.
 2. Ibid., p. 294.
 3. Ibid., p. 208.
 4. Ibid., p. 214.
 5. Ibid., p. 215.
 6. Ibid., p. 219.

The Dreaming of Bones is not only the best and most straightforward of Yeats' Noh plays but it is also the nearest in spirit to his Japanese models. In this play the introductory description of the musicians, the rhythmic dance, the symbolic journey on the stage, the ghosts living through their lives again as penance, enemies engaging in dream-battles above their bones, are all characteristic of the Noh drama. The subject of the play, however, is the Irish legend of Dermot and Dervorgilla. As soon as the musicians set the mood of the play, a Young Man, who is trying to escape from the pursuit of the English in Ireland, appears on the stage. In the course of his flight over the mountains he meets with a Stranger and a Young Girl who warn him against ghosts abroad that night, and offer to show him the way to the coast. On their journey, the Stranger and the Young Girl, describe to the Young Man the activities of the 'shades' that haunt the valleys and the mountain sides at night :

Stranger. ... some for an old scruple must hang spitted
Upon the swaying tops of lofty trees;
Some are consumed in fire, some withered up
By hail and sleet out of the wintry North,
And some but live through their old lives again. 1

They tell him of the ghosts of the accursed Dermot and Dervorgilla

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, pp. 436-437.

who have been wandering on the desolate hills for seven centuries.

They can embrace but never kiss;

Young Girl. Their manner of life were blessed could their lips
A moment meet; but when he has bent his head
Close to her head, or hand would slip in hand,
The memory of their crime flows up between
And drives them apart. 1

The crime of bringing a foreign army to Ireland from across the sea will keep them always apart unless someone of their race can forgive them. At this point the Stranger and the Young Girl gazing on each other with passionate eyes begin to dance. Their dance has an aesthetic as well as a dramatic significance for it not only expresses the sorrow and the passionate longing of the lovers but also resolves the suspense of the play. The Young Man, the Irish fugitive, understands at once from the manner of their dance that he has been talking to the ghosts of Dermot and Dervorgilla. This dramatic turn is common enough in the Noh plays but Yeats should be praised for the manner in which he has gathered the story around the dance, successfully making it the centre of his drama.

Nishikigi, one of Yeats' favourite plays, turns on a dramatic situation very much similar to the one used in The Dreaming of Bones. It deals with the story of two lovers who 'in life and in after-life'

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 441.

are 'kept apart'.¹ Night after night, 'love's thoughts are heaped high within'² these Japanese ghost-lovers, always to end in frustration and disappointment. Their "aery bodies repeatedly return, under dream, to sorrow over their unconsummated love. In Ikuta, the description of an ancient Japanese battle which is reproduced every night by the ghosts of those killed in it³ is also distinctly echoed in The Dreaming of Bones. The Young Girl describes the old Irish battles which are nightly re-enacted by the ghosts of the dead warriors :

Young Girl. ... those that are buried there
Warred in the heat of the blood...
They and their enemies of Thomond's party
Mix in a brief dream-battle above their bones...⁴

We should not omit to mention that Yeats tried to relate the supernatural experiences, which he adopted from the Japanese plays, to his own system. He associated them with other manifestations of Anima Mundi :

... Japanese plays will have it that we may see
at certain roads... ancient armies fighting above
bones or ashes. We carry to Anima Mundi our memory,
and that memory is for a time our external world;
and all passionate moments recur again and again... ⁵

In Calvary, written also on the Japanese model, Yeats explores

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1. E. Pound and E. Fenollosa, 'Noh' or Accomplishment,
Pound's note pp. 5-6.
 2. Ibid., pp. 146-147.
 3. Arthur Waley (trans.), The Nō Plays of Japan, London, 1921, pp. 78-79.
 4. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 439.
 5. W.B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', Essays, pp. 520-521.

the central Christian myth from the point of view of the system of A Vision. Christ has inaugurated an objective (primary) cycle and can only help and pity those 'whose suffering is rooted in death, in poverty, or in sickness' or any such 'exterior vicissitude'.¹ In this play Yeats wants to show that there are other types which He could not touch -- those who are purely subjective by nature, those who belong historically to a subjective tradition, and those whose suffering is intellectual. To emphasise the objective nature of Christ, he surrounds Him with the images of those He cannot save, not only with birds (Yeats' symbols of natural subjectivity), but with Lazarus, Judas, and the Roman soldiers for whom He died in vain.

The musicians opening song is a lament for the vanishing subjective tradition which the birth of Christ is about to bring to an end :

First Musician. Motionless under the moon-beam,
Up to his feathers in the stream;
Although fish leap, the white heron
Shivers in a dumbfounded dream...

Third Musician. Although half famished he'll not dare
Dip or do anything but stare
Upon the glittering image of a heron,
That now is lost and now is there.

Second Musician. God has not died for the white heron. 2

1. W.B. Yeats, Four Plays for Dancers, notes p. 136.
2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, pp. 449-450.

The First Musician announces the impending revolution of the wheel.
The new civilization will reverse all the values of the preceding
one :

First Musician. But that the full is shortly gone
And after that is crescent moon,
It's certain that the moon-crazed heron
Would be but fishes' diet soon. 1

Christ is conceived of as 'nothing more than a man, the best man
who ever lived'.² According to Yeats' theory of the mask, He must,
therefore, embrace the worst and most terrible of all possible
destinies. On accepting His anti-self, He becomes the Messiah
and takes upon Himself the utmost possible suffering.

First Musician. The cross that but exists because He dreams it
Shortens His breath and wears away His strength. 3

The whole play is built round imagery of two types of contrasting
loneliness; the objective loneliness of Christ amid subjective
surroundings, and the subjective self-sufficiency of those who
surround him. Lazarus appears with a corpse-like face, claiming
death from Christ who has disturbed his solitude :

Lazarus. Alive I never could escape your love,
And when I sickened towards my death I thought,
' I'll to the desert, or chuckle in a corner,
Mere ghost, a solitary thing.' 4

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 450.
 2. Ibid., p. 583.
 3. Ibid., p. 450.
 4. Ibid., p. 452.

Judas who could not tolerate the idea of complete dependence on an outside god ('could not bear to think you had to whistle / And I must do') says that when he planned the betrayal

Judas. There was no live thing near me but a heron
So full of itself that it seemed terrified. 1

The last song of the musicians mentions other birds symbolic of self-contained loneliness — the sea-bird, the geier-eagle and the swan.

First Musician. But where have last year's cygnets gone ?
The lake is empty...
What can a swan need but a swan ? 2

In the preface of The King of the Great Clock Tower, written in 1935, Yeats writes :

Fighting the Waves and the present play so far emulate the Japanese model that they climax in a dance and substitute suggestion for representation; but, like the Japanese plays themselves, they are stage plays. 3

The central situation in the play is related to the system of A Vision, and to the Platonic-Christian myth of 'the slain god, the risen god'.⁴ In The King of the Great Clock Tower, a stroller who heard that the king had married a woman 'called the most beautiful of her sex'⁵ spent all his time singing of her beauty.

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 454.
 2. Ibid., p. 457.
 3. W.B. Yeats, The King of the Great Clock Tower, Commentaries and Poems, pp. 18-19.
 4. A. Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 826.
 5. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 635.

Having sworn to see the Queen he has put into his songs, he was promised by Aengus, the god of love, that

The Stroller. 'On stroke of midnight when the old year dies,
Upon that stroke, the tolling of that bell,
The Queen shall kiss your mouth... ' 1

He comes up to the King's palace on the appointed day to ask for what he was promised. The King becomes very angry at the audacity of this brazen man and orders his head to be cut off. When the severed head of the stroller is set before the Queen she sings :

Second Attendant (singing as Queen).
O, what may come
Into my womb... ? 2

She takes up the head in her hands and begins a ritual dance.

All of a sudden the severed head starts singing of the sexual joys of eternity, and the Queen lays it upon her breast and kisses its lips.

Yeats discovered that the King, Queen, and Stroller of The King of the Great Clock Tower, were 'a character too many' and if 'reduced to the essentials, to Queen and Stroller, the fable should have greater intensity'.³ Therefore, he wrote a new version of the play and changed the title to A Full Moon in March. In it a Queen is to be won by him who sings his passion best. A Swineherd, foul and ugly, comes on the night of 'a full moon in March' to seek the prize :

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 637.

2. Ibid., p. 638.

3. W.B. Yeats, A Full Moon in March, London, 1935, intro. pp. v-vi.

The Swineherd. Queen, look at me, look long at these foul rags...
Look on my scratched foul flesh. Have I not come
Through dust and mire ? 1

The Queen is insulted by the appearance of the man and threatens
to have his head cut off. He tells her the story of a woman

The Swineherd. That stood all bathed in blood -- a drop of blood
Entered her womb and there begat a child. 2

Angry and impatient she has him beheaded. The Swineherd's resurrection
takes place, and the Queen dances with the singing severed head
as before.

Before we examine this fable, we should try to define some
of the terms used by Yeats in the play. In A Vision he has called
the fifteenth day of March 'the month of victims and of saviours'³ :

At the Ides of March, at the full moon in
March, is the Vernal Equinox, symbolical of
the first degree of Aries, the first day of
our symbolical or ideal year. 4

In a note on the play, Yeats explains that the dance with the
severed head suggests the central idea in Wilde's Salome. Wilde
took it from Heine 'who somewhere described Salome in Hell throwing
into the air the head of John the Baptist.' Heine, he adds, 'found
it in some Jewish religious legend, for it is part of the old ritual
of the year : the mother goddess and the slain god.'⁵ The King,

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 623.
 2. Ibid., p. 626.
 3. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 245.
 4. Ibid., p. 196.
 5. W.B. Yeats, A Full Moon in March, intro., p.vi.

the Queen, and the Stroller in this archetypal play stand, therefore, in exact symbolic relation to the King of the Gods, the Mother Goddess and Attis (or Osiris). The Stroller (or the Swineherd) who has 'come through dust and mire' symbolises spirit fallen into matter, spirit which is nevertheless in love with and beloved by the Mother Goddess. Attis has to suffer symbolic mutilation and death at the hand of the Mother Goddess, as the Stroller does at the hand of Yeats' Queen.

The King and the Queen are also associated in this play with the sun and the moon. In A Vision, Yeats writes:

There is that continual oscillation which I have
symbolised elsewhere as a King and Queen, who
are Sun and Moon also... 1

According to the system, when the moon enters its twenty-eighth phase it is completely dominated by the sun (the King of the play). In this phase the moon is in a state of 'complete passivity'. This accounts for the fact that the Queen in The King of the Great Clock Tower wears a beautiful but 'impassive mask'.²

The King. A year ago you walked into this house,
A year ago to-night...
... why sit you there
Dumb as an image made of wood or metal,
A screen between the living and the dead ? 3

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1925), p. 182.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 633.
 3. Ibid., p. 634.

When the Stroller comes, he finds the Queen (in this state of passivity) at the lowest ebb of her beauty :

The Stroller. Neither so red, nor white, nor full in the breast
As I had thought... 1

The singing of the severed head symbolises the final liberation of the victim-god, at the beginning of a new cycle of the moon (a new cycle of the Great Year). Yeats reminds us in this play of Virgil's fourth eclogue, to establish this meaning :

First Attendant. Sacred Virgil never sang
All the marvel there begun...
A moment more and it tolls midnight. 2

G.R.S. Mead in his book Thrice Greatest Hermes gives an account of the myth of Osiris which bears a curious resemblance to Yeats' parable in A Full Moon in March. According to him, the Egyptians who based their religion on mathematical doctrines derived from the star-lore, thought of the solar cosmos as 'Typhon' and of the lunar as 'Isis'. The myth runs that

... the death of Osiris took place... when the full-moon is most conspicuously at the full... at the Burials of Osiris they cut the tree-trunk and make it into a crescent-shaped coffin, because the Moon, when it approaches the Sun... hides itself away... [after] the tearing of Osiris into fourteen pieces they keep festival, calling it 'Entrance' of Osiris into the Moon, as it is the beginning of spring. By

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1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 636.
 2. Ibid., p. 640.

thus placing ... Osiris in the Moon, they mean that Isis consorts with him while being at the same time the cause of his birth. For which cause also they call the Moon Mother of the cosmos... 1

The Herne's Egg (1938) is also based upon an archetypal myth : the marriage of a woman and a bird at the springtime of the Great Year. The play opens at the end of the fiftieth battle between Congal, King of Connacht, and Aedh, King of Tara. The two Kings who have literally spent their lives fighting each other, decide during a lull in the fighting to hold a feast. Congal has set his mind on dining on Herne's eggs which can only be obtained at a great hernery owned by a prophetess named Attracta. He summons her and acquaints her with his wish but she declares that custom forbids :

Attracta. Only the women of these rocks,
Betrothed or married to the Herne...
Can eat, handle, or look upon those eggs. 2

After a long argument, the King orders his men to take the eggs by force, and Attracta pronounces a curse. Congal sets out for Tara, pursued by the Great Herne, whom he and his men unsuccessfully try to stone and beat down. At the banqueting hall the King discovers that instead of a Herne's egg, 'a common hen's egg' has been

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1. G.R.S. Mead, Thrice Greatest Hermes, Vol.I, pp. 318-321.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 649.

put before him and suspects that Aedh has secretly ordered the change in order to disparage him. In the ensuing quarrel, they fight with table-legs and Aedh dies of a broken head. Congal finds out later that it was Attracta who changed one egg for another and holds her responsible for the death of a King. He decrees that as a punishment seven men

Congal. Must handle, penetrate, and possess her,
And do her a great good by that action,
Melting out the virgin snow,
And that snow image, the Great Herne... 1

In scene five we learn that when Congal and his men begin to rape Attracta, the god (the Great Herne) descends into them, and uses their bodies to consummate his love and to fulfil the prophecy. In the last scene Congal is called to the holy mountain top on the night of a full moon where he was doomed to die at the hand of a fool. To escape this fate, he stabs himself and dies as a result of his own folly instead. At the moment of his death Attracta tries to save him from the punishment of metempsychosis decreed for him, but she is too late. A donkey breaks loose and couples with another in the field below and 'King Congal must be born a donkey.'

When Yeats started to write The Herne's Egg in 1935, he was

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 662.

working with Purohit Swami on their translation of the Upanishads.

He wrote to Dorothy Wellesley at the time :

Shri Purohit Swami is with me, and the play [The Herne's Egg] is his philosophy in a fable, or mine confirmed by him. 1

The poet had always been interested, as we have already indicated, in the subjective traditions which see the deity in the Self.

He predicted that the impending revolution of the cycles would bring round some kind of Brahmanical or 'Ledan' civilization in which man and God would be joined again. The image of the bird as God which he introduces in this play, is common in many Oriental religions, particularly the Indian. In the 'eighties, Yeats learnt from Blavatsky that

The 'First Cause'... was pictured in the fancy of the thinkers as an ever invisible, mysterious Bird that dropped an Egg into Chaos, which Egg becomes the Universe. Hence Brahm was called Kalahansa, 'the Swan in Space and Time.' He became the 'Swan of Eternity', who lays at the beginning of each Mahamanvantara a 'Golden Egg'... the Egg was a symbol adopted among the Greeks, the Syrians, Persians, and Egyptians... 2

She further explained that every ancient mythology had its divine bird -- a hawk, a swan, an albatross or a dove. Yeats accepted this theory and in A Vision declared that whenever he tried to

1. Dorothy Wellesley (ed.), Letters on Poetry, p. 46.

2. H.P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, Vol. I, p. 359.

imagine previous annunciations, he could only 'see bird and woman'.¹

In The Herne's Egg, Yeats, in deference to the Celtic setting of the play, has chosen the Irish heron as a representative of subjective Godhead. The virgin Attracta describes him as 'the only reality' and explains to Congal that she is

Attracta. Chosen out of all my kind
That I may lie in a blazing bed
And a bird take my maidenhead... 2

Yeats tries to establish the identity of the bird in terms that remind us of the properties of Godhead as described in 'Ribh Denounces Patrick' :

Attracta. Being all sufficient to himself
Begot himself... 3

There is also a very subtle reference to the imagery of 'Leda and the Swan' in the description of the supreme act of love in which man and god are joined :

Attracta. When beak and claw their work begin
Shall horror stir in the roots of my hair ?
And who lie there in the cold dawn
When all that terror has come and gone ?
Shall I be the woman lying there ? 4

When we turn to consider the significance of the ceaseless warring of King Congal and King Aedh, we find that it is meant to

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1. W.B. Yeats, A Vision (1937), p. 268.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 650.
 3. Ibid., p. 677.
 4. Ibid., pp. 664-665.

symbolise the universal struggle in the sublunary world. The opening stage direction emphasises the fact that they are only fighting a stylised battle :

Many men fight with swords and shields, but
sword and sword, shield and sword, never
meet. The men move rhythmically as if in
a dance. 1

The exchange between the two Kings after the battle clearly indicates the nature of the conflict :

Congal. How many men have you lost ?

Aedh. Some five-and-twenty men.

Congal. No need to ask my losses.

Aedh. Your losses equal mine.

Congal. They always have and must. 2

Aedh, whose name is the Irish for fire, has been described elsewhere by Yeats as 'fire burning by itself',³ and it may be reasonable to think that he stands for the spiritual side in the conflict while Congal represents the material. The death of Aedh, in scene four, at the hand of his enemy is comparable to the decline and final disappearance of spiritual values at the end of a historical cycle. With his death all balance is at an end and Congal and his men

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 645.

2. Ibid.

3. P. Allt and R. Alspach (eds.), The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, notes, p. 803.

proceed to commit a typical act -- the rape of Attracta. The eventual death of Congal himself marks the complete disintegration of an old dispensation and clears the way for the one inaugurated by Attracta.

Before the curse on Congal and his men takes effect, however, they are made use of in a completely different connection. They are employed to symbolise the seven constellations of heaven which, according to A Vision, must return to the position from which they once set forth, at the beginning of every new cycle.

Certain cycles must have begun when all
the planets stood toeing a line like young
athletes. 1

The seven men 'that must weep' at the funeral of Aedh (marking the end of one era) must also possess Attracta because, as Congal puts it, 'we all complete a task or a circle'. He tries to persuade his men that their act is decreed by mathematics (of heaven) :

Congal. A Court of Law is a blessed thing,
Logic, Mathematics, ground in one,
And everything out of balance accursed...
I will put a mark, then all must stand
Over there in a level row.
And all take off their caps and throw.
The nearest cap shall take her first,
The next shall take her next, so on
Till all is in good order done. 2

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1. Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, The Holy Mountain, Yeats' intro. p. 39.
 2. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, pp. 663-664.

Kate, Mary and Agnes, like the Magi in the Christian story, come to pay their homage to Attracta and to present her with gifts :

Kate. We bring three presents. (All except Attracta kneel)¹

There is a very strong suggestion that after the new annunciation, these three women, who are also somehow 'betrothed to the Herne',² will beget the new races of the earth :

Attracta. All, when I am married,
Shall have good husbands. Kate
Shall marry a black-headed lad.

Agnes. She swore but yesterday
That she would marry black.

Attracta. But Agnes there shall marry
A honey-coloured lad... etc,etc. 3

Purohit Swami and the Upanishads have left their mark on the imagery as well as the subject-matter of this play. In the first part of The Herne's Egg God manifests Himself as a divine bird and in the second part as roaring thunder. In the Brihadāranyaka-Upanishad Brahma is described as 'the Self, Hamsa, the solitary Bird'⁴, and in the Katha-Upanishad as He who 'strikes terror' and 'hangs like a thunderbolt overhead'.⁵ In the Hindu Scriptures, it should be remembered, the universe is called Brahmand which literally means 'the egg of God'. The traditional Indian image

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 652.

2. Ibid., p. 649.

3. Ibid., p. 653.

4. Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats (trans.), The Ten Principal Upanishads, p. 149.

5. Ibid., p. 36.

of the arrow-smith occurs in Attracta's description of her marriage with the Great Herne:

Attracta. Strong sinew and soft flesh
Are foliage round the shaft
Before the arrowsmith
Has stripped it, and I pray
That I, all foliage gone,
May shoot into my joy -- 1

In the Katha-Upanishad we are told that God lives in the heart and that 'Man should strip him of the body, as the arrow-maker strips the reed, that he may know Him as perpetual and pure'.² The punishment decreed by the Herne for Congal and his men accords with the beliefs which the Upanishads inculcate.

Attracta. He will come when you are dead,
Push you down a step or two
Into cat or rat or bat,
Into dog or wolf or goose. 3

The Kena-Upanishad asserts that the man who fails, 'sinks among fouler shapes'⁴ after his death. In the second scene of the play Corney addresses his donkey as though he was a robber in a previous life and is now made a donkey to receive his just punishment.

F. Wilson has recently pointed out that the reincarnation of Congal as a donkey and Attracta's unsuccessful attempt to vouchsafe him a human shape by giving herself to Corney at the moment of his death,

1. W.B. Yeats, The Collected Plays, pp. 653-654.

2. Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats (trans.), The Ten Principal Upanishads, p. 38.

3. Op. Cit., p. 669.

4. Op. Cit., p. 21.

is taken over from an Indian folk-story. Perhaps Purohit Swami told it to him, or perhaps he read it in Alexandra David-Neel's With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet. In her version, a young girl is accosted by a holy man, who attempts to violate her. She runs away, but her mother sends her back, telling her the man is holy and she must submit to his will. But the saint explains that it is now too late :

'My child' he said, 'women awake no desire in me. However, the Grand Lama of the neighbouring monastery has died in ignorance, having neglected all occasion of instruction. I saw his spirit wandering in the Bardo, drawn towards a bad rebirth, and, out of compassion, I wished to procure him a human body... You escaped, and while you were at the village, two asses in that field nearby coupled. The Grand Lama will soon be reborn as a donkey. 1

The Herne's Egg has been considered by many critics as a mysterious and unsatisfactory play. The trouble arises from the fact that it does not yield its full meaning to the reader who is not familiar with the system of A Vision . It is also quite

1. A. David-Neel, With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet, London, 1931, pp. 35-36.

unapproachable without a thorough knowledge of the whole body of Yeats' symbolism, for in it he takes up, without explaining them, a number of symbols which he has used in the past.

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